Article

Historiography and Archives of the Orthodox Mission in Kazakhstan: From Early Christian Origins to the Modern Metropolis

Nurmukhamed Kenzhegulov *

Egyptian University of Islamic Culture Nur-Mubarak, Almaty, Kazakhstan
*Corresponding author's email: noorken@mail.ru

Abstract

Christianity is one of the major religious traditions in Kazakhstan. The broad network of Christian religious organizations operates throughout the country. The state acknowledges the historical role of Orthodox Christianity. Drawing on archival and published sources, this article examines the process through which the Russian Orthodox Church was introduced, spread, and institutionally established across the territory of Kazakhstan from the 18th century to the present day. The study analyzes the interrelationship between the expansion of administrative and military-frontier presence, the resettlement of the Slavic population, and the formation of Orthodox ecclesiastical infrastructure. These historical processes led to the establishment of the Orenburg, Tobolsk, Tomsk, Omsk, and Turkestan dioceses, which interacted with the military-civil administration of the Russian Empire. During the Soviet period, administrative control over religious life was intensified: churches were closed, and clergy of various denominations were subjected to repression. A growth in the number of Orthodox dioceses is observed in independent Kazakhstan. Furthermore, this article examines the missionary activities of the Orthodox clergy among the Kazakh population, as well as their impact on the region's religious landscape. Historical data were compared with contemporary statistics, making it possible to identify key trends in the transformation of Orthodoxy from the imperial period to the present day.

Keywords: Orthodoxy; missionary activity; church infrastructure; Orthodox ecosystem; diocese.

Received: 08 August 2026
Revised: 06 September 2026
Accepted: 10 September 2026
Copyright: © 2026 by the author. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license.

Қазақстандағы православиелік миссияның тарихнамасы мен мұрағаттық деректері: алғашқы христиандық бастаулардан қазіргі заманғы митрополияға дейін

Аңдатпа

Қазақстандағы христиандық көптеген діни конфессиялардың бірі болып табылады. Ел аумағында христиандық діни ұйымдардың кең желісі қызмет етеді. Мемлекет православиелік христиандықтың тарихи рөлін мойындайды. Бұл мақалада мұрағаттық және жарияланған дереккөздер негізінде XVIII ғасырдан қазіргі уақытқа дейінгі кезеңде Қазақстан аумағындағы Орыс православие шіркеуінің енуің, кеңею және өңірлік деңгейде институционалдық тұрғыдан орнығу үдерісі қарастырылады. Зерттеу әкімшілік және әскери-шекаралық қатысудың кеңеюі, славян халқының қоныстандыру және православиелік шіркеу инфрақұрылымының қалыптасуы арасындағы өзара байланысты талдайды. Осы тарихи үдерістер барысында Орынбор, Тобыл, Томск, Омск және Түркістан епархиялары құрылып, олар Ресей империясының әскери-азаматтық әкімшілігімен өзара іс-қимыл жасады. Кеңес дәуірінде діни өмірге әкімшілік бақылау күшейтілді: шіркеулер жабылып, әртүрлі конфессиялардың дін қызметкерлері қуғын-сүргінге ұшырады. Тәуелсіз Қазақстанда православиелік епархиялар санының артқаны байқалады. Сонымен қатар, бұл мақалада православиелік діни қызметкерлердің қазақ халқы арасындағы миссионерлік қызметі, сондай-ақ олардың аймақтағы діни ахуалға ықпалы қарастырылады. Тарихи деректер қазіргі статистикалық деректермен салыстырылып, бұл империялық кезеңнен бүгінгі күнге дейінгі православие дініндегі трансформациясының негізгі үрдістерін анықтауға мүмкіндік береді.

Түйін сөздер: православие; миссионерлік қызмет; шіркеу инфрақұрылымы; православиелік экожүйе; епархия.

Историография и архивы православной миссии в Казахстане: от древнехристианских истоков до современной митрополии

Аннотация

Христианство в Казахстане является одной из многочисленных конфессий. В стране действует обширная сеть христианских объединений. Государство признает историческую роль православного христианства. В настоящей статье на основе архивных и опубликованных источников рассматривается процесс проникновения, распространения и регионального институционального оформления Русской православной церкви на территории Казахстана с XVIII века по настоящее время. В рамках исследования анализируется взаимосвязь между расширением административного и военно-пограничного присутствия, переселением славянского населения и формированием православной церковной инфраструктуры. В ходе этих исторических процессов сформировались Оренбургская, Тобольская, Томская, Омская, Туркестанская епархии, которые взаимодействовали с военно-гражданской администрацией Российской империи. В советский период был усилен административный контроль за религиозной жизнью: закрывались храмы, репрессировали духовенство различных конфессий. В независимом Казахстане отмечается увеличение количества православных епархий. Кроме того, в рамках статьи рассматривается миссионерская деятельность православного духовенства среди казахского населения, а также влияние на конфессиональную структуру региона. Исторические данные были сопоставлены с современными статистическими данными, что позволило выявить основные тенденции трансформации православия от имперского периода до современности.

Ключевые слова: православие; миссионерская деятельность; церковная инфраструктура; православная экосистема; епархия.

Introduction

Sociological studies show that 86.8% of Kazakhstan's residents consider themselves believers. The vast majority (88.6%) support state policy regarding religion and view the religious situation in the country positively (81.9%). The level of religious literacy among the population stands at 58.5%, while the level of intolerance toward members of other faiths is 3.8% (Exclusive.kz, 2026).

The Christian population constitutes one component of Kazakhstan's diverse religious landscape. The earliest Christian communities are associated with the arrival of Nestorians and date back to the 3rd and 4th centuries. The caravan routes of the Silk Road served as key pathways. Nestorian Christianity began to spread among both the nomadic and the sedentary indigenous populations. Communities emerged in Southern Kazakhstan and Zhetysu, and in the 9th-10th centuries the Karluk Metropolitanate was established. Historical monuments bore witness to the presence of Christianity. Until approximately the 17th century, there was no stable diocesan structure in the Kazakh Steppe. Between 1731 and 1860, prayer houses and garrison churches were established (Znamenskii, 1880). Catholics and Lutherans fleeing the Russian tsar also settled there, alongside Catholics deported from Poland and Ukraine during World War II.

During the Soviet period, the Russian Orthodox Church underwent a significant reorganization of its diocesan structure: a large number of dioceses were abolished or merged as a result of the mass closure of churches and repressions against the clergy in the 1920s and 1930s, and were subsequently partially restored in the 1940s against the backdrop of a temporary easing of state policy toward the Church during the Great Patriotic War. At the same time, the state tightened administrative control over religious life through the creation of specialized bodies – the Council for Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church (established in 1943) and the Council for Religious Affairs – which regulated the registration of congregations, the appointment of clergy, and the activities of diocesan administrations. These measures were implemented as part of the state policy of scientific atheism, aimed at the gradual displacement of religion from public life while formally maintaining constitutional freedom of religion.

The religious landscape of modern Kazakhstan is the result of a long historical process of interaction between the traditions native to the region – Hanafi Islam and Orthodox Christianity, also Tengrism, shamanism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Manichaeism, Judaism. According to Kazakhstan's censuses, Slavic and European ethnic groups (Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Poles, Germans, Serbs, and others) reside in the country (Alekseenko & Alekseenko, 2009); many of them are traditionally Christian, including Orthodox Christians.

The Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan enshrines the principles of secularism and every citizen's right to freedom of conscience. Furthermore, specialized legislation establishes the equality of all religions, the separation of religious associations from the state, and the principle of non-interference. At the same time, understanding the country's contemporary religious landscape is impossible without examining the history of the arrival and spread of Christianity, including Orthodoxy.

The study of the history and activities of the Russian Orthodox Church in Kazakhstan is actual for several reasons: firstly, the topic has been insufficiently researched compared to the historiography of Islam in the region; secondly, there is practical significance in possessing objective knowledge about the history of religions and the expansion of church structures; and thirdly, there is enduring public interest in the history of religious communities in Kazakhstan within the context of its multi-ethnic and multi-confessional society. Several Kazakhstani scholars examine Christianity in Kazakhstan: Y. Trofimov and V. Ivanov (2006), G. Kussainova (2011), Sh. Rysbekova, A. Kurmanaliyeva, and B. Meirbayev (2016), T. Marmontova (2016), G. Zhapekova and A. Ramazanova (2018). Moreover, some researchers examine specific Christian denominations and processes of religious conversion

in their work, and present an analysis of the activities and trends of Christian organizations in Kazakhstan: M. Asanbaev (2006), R. Podoprigora (2013), N. Altayeva (2017), Yu. Shapoval (2020), K. Yerzhan, D. Mamyrbayev, Y. Karibekuly (2026), Z. Malgarayeva, R. Kamarova (2024), A. Temirbayeva, N. Kenzhegulov, S. Alimkulova (2025). An analysis of scholarly publications reveals that Christianity has primarily been examined in the context of interfaith relations and the Kazakhstani model of secularism. At the same time, the focus of research has shifted from treating Christianity merely as one of several denominations toward studying conversion processes, the activities and institutional development of Christian associations, and emerging trends. Among the works of foreign scholars, particular attention should be given to the studies by M. Laruelle (2021), S. Peyrouse (2004), R. Weller (2014), D. Achilov (2013), A. Ganje (2019) among others. An analysis of foreign publications reveals a broader Christian landscape, local adaptation practices, interactions with state authorities, and evolving missionary activities. The research problem stems from in the lack of a comprehensive study that examines the interrelationship between the colonization of the Kazakh Steppe, the institutionalization of the Russian Orthodox Church (specifically the formation of its dioceses), and organized missionary activity among the indigenous Kazakh population during the period of imperial period (1730-1917).

In this context, the aim of this article is to reconstruct and analyze the processes of the formation, regional expansion, and institutional consolidation of the Russian Orthodox Church in the territory of Kazakhstan, as well as to compare archival evidence with the current data. The chronological scope of the study extends from the 1730s, when Abul-Khair Khan, the ruler of Junior Zhuz (or Lesser Zhuz), accepted the protectorate of the Russian Empire, to the present day. The geographical scope is confined to the modern borders of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Materials and Methods

The research was based primarily on archival documents:

– in the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan,

– state archives of the Omsk and Orenburg regions (Russian Federation),

– Russian State Historical Archive,

– Russian State Military-Historical Archive,

– the Central State Archive of Ancient Acts and the State Archive of Altai krai.

– archives of the Orenburg, Tobolsk, Tomsk, Omsk, and Turkestan ecclesiastical administrations, as well as reports by the heads of the Kirghiz (Altai) Ecclesiastical Mission,

– diocesan gazettes: the Orenburgskie Eparkhialnye Vedomosti (Orenburg Diocesan Gazette), Omskie Eparkhialnye Vedomosti (Omsk Diocesan Gazette), Tomskie Eparkhialnye Vedomosti (Tomsk Diocesan Gazette), and Turkestanskie Eparkhialnye Vedomosti (Turkestan Diocesan Gazette),

– Code of Laws of the Russian Empire,

– Complete Collection of Laws of the Russian Empire.

This research was conducted between 2011 and 2025. The author personally visited the archives to locate materials. Current statistical data were obtained from the official websites of government bodies of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Orthodox Church of Kazakhstan.

The author employed the historical-descriptive method as the primary approach, focusing on an objective reconstruction of events within their chronological and causal contexts. Work with archival materials involved the heuristic search for and identification of documents relevant to the research topic, as well as their systematization based on chronological and thematic principles.

Results and Discussion

The Russian population in Kazakh Steppe and the policy of the Russian Empire

By the end of the 16th century, contacts between Kazakh khans and the Russian Empire were linked to the development of transit trade across the Kazakh Steppes to Asia. The incorporation of the Kazakh khanates into the Russian state provided direct access to the borders of the Kazakh Zhuzes (Kazan Khanate, 1552; Astrakhan Khanate, 1556; Siberian Khanate, 1582). A key step was the acceptance of Russian suzerainty by Abul-Khair Khan (khan of Junior Zhuz). In 1731, Empress Anna Ioannovna signed a charter recognizing the voluntary acceptance of Russian protection by Abul-Khair Khan of the Junior Zhuz, and an embassy was subsequently dispatched to administer the oath of allegiance (Apollova, 1948).

During the early years of Russian suzerainty, the Russian Empire undertook systematic surveys of the Kazakh lands, which were subsequently followed by the construction of military frontier lines, including the Orenburg, Irtysh, and Siberian lines (Alektorov, 1892). The formation of Cossack forces was accompanied by the resettlement of Russian and Ukrainian peasants, a process that intensified particularly during the second half of the 19th and the early 20th centuries in the northern, eastern, and southeastern regions of Kazakhstan (Antipin & Abdrakhmanov, 2026, p. 28). At the same time, alongside the military-administrative integration of the region, the Russian Empire appointed Tatar mullahs to mosques in the Kazakh Steppe. They were appointed by special decree, and the term “decree-appointed mullah” which became established in popular usage. Their responsibilities encompassed a wide range of duties: the construction of mosques, education, the performance of religious rites, the registration of births and deaths, among others. From the mid-19th century, the Russian Empire pursued a policy of intensifying the missionary activities of the Orthodox Church (RGIA, F. 821, File 594, pp. 48–49).

The Spread and Formation of the Regional Church-Administrative Structure

The church reform of Peter I (1721) abolished the Patriarchate and established the Most Holy Governing Synod. Moreover, the activities of this institution were subject to supervision by a state official appointed by the monarch (Nikolsky, 1985). Between 1731 and 1860, the formation of Cossack detachments and the resettlement of the Slavic population led to the establishment of prayer houses and churches at the garrisons. All these processes took place within the broader framework of the Russian Empire’s military and administrative expansion into the Kazakh Steppe. By 1866, small Orthodox churches had appeared in the southern cities of Turkestan and Shymkent. In 1871, the Diocese of Turkestan was established in the city of Verny (modern-day Almaty) (SGA RK, F. 1, File 6461, p. 1). This is the first independent Orthodox episcopal see directly linked to the territory of future Kazakhstan. Prior to 1917, Orthodoxy underwent rapid development and expansion. By 1917, the number of Russian Orthodox Church dioceses within the Russian Empire had risen from 22 (at the beginning of the 18th century) to 68. With regard to Kazakh lands, the process of establishing dioceses unfolded along three vectors, corresponding to the colonization of the three Kazakh Zhuzes. In the west, within the territory of the Junior Zhuz, parishes fell under the jurisdiction of the Orenburg Diocese, which was administratively linked to the Orenburg Border Commission (Kenzhegulov, 2025, p. 141). In the north and northeast, encompassing the territories of the Middle and, partly, the Senior Zhuz, ecclesiastical jurisdiction successively fell under the Tobolsk Eparchy, then the Tomsk Eparchy (from 1834, through the Altai Mission, and institutionally from 1838), and, from 1895, the newly established Omsk Eparchy, which consolidated parishes from the abolished parts of the Tobolsk and Tomsk eparchies (SGA RK, F. 387, File 129, pp. 6–9, 32; GAOmO, F. 3, File 11259, pp. 1, 8). In the southern and southeastern regions, following the expansion of the Russian frontier in the 1860s, the Turkestan Eparchy was established, incorporating parishes that had previously been under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Orenburg and Tomsk dioceses.

An analysis of archival data reveals that the formation of the diocese during the 18th and 19th centuries was closely linked both to the administrative reforms of the Russian Empire, specifically the repeated redrawing of diocesan boundaries resulting from changes in administrative-territorial divisions, and to the state's military-frontier policy, involving the interaction of ecclesiastical structures with the military and civil authorities of the frontier zone (Kenzhegulov, 2019, p. 194; RGVIA, F. 330, File 52, p. 1). Of particular significance was the proposed and subsequent development of a vicariate system intended to improve ecclesiastical administration across the vast Steppe region (SGA RK, F. 64, File 125, p. 18). As this study demonstrates, the second half of the 19th century, the influx of Slavic settlers and the growth in the number of parishes led to the further territorial expansion of the diocese and subsequent structural changes of its administration.

In modern times, the Orthodox Church in Kazakhstan has a hierarchical structure:

- Moscow Patriarchate,

- Metropolia – Metropolitan District of the Republic of Kazakhstan,

- Eparchy (there are 10 eparchies in total, covering the entire territory of the country). Departments and organizations operate within this structure,

- Vicariate (operates within two eparchies),

- Deaneries (ecclesiastical districts),

- Parishes or religious communities (totaling 300 parishes with over 380 clergy, 9 monasteries),

- Specialized departments and commissions (over 15 institutions: prison ministry, youth ministry, ecclesiastical court, publishing and information activities, Temperance Society, disciplinary commission, department for work with the armed forces and law enforcement agencies, etc.) (Metropolitan District of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Republic of Kazakhstan, n.d.).

- Almaty Orthodox Theological Seminary.

The seminary has full-time and part-time departments and offers training in three areas:

1) Pastoral studies (training for priestly and pastoral ministry, with a focus on theology, Holy Scripture, liturgics, canon law, pastoral psychology, and the practice of communication with parishioners);

2) Regency studies (training for church choir directors, with a focus on liturgical singing, choral conducting, music notation, the liturgical rubrics, and the specific features of Orthodox worship);

3) Catechetical studies (training a catechist for provide who explains the fundamentals of the Christian faith, assist people to prepare for the sacrament of baptism and marriage, and introduce them to Orthodox doctrine and the basics of church life) (Almaty Orthodox Theological Seminary, n.d.).

Construction of a church complex on the left bank of the capital, Astana, began in 2019. In terms of scale, it is one of the largest Orthodox churches in Central Asia. According to local media reports, in addition to the church itself, a school, a kindergarten, administrative buildings, a pediatric oncology center, a museum, and a library are being built nearby. The plan also includes wellness facilities with a swimming pool and residential apartments for the clergy. The church complex is being built using charitable funds. In September 2025, it was consecrated by the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill. Residential development is also planned next to the spiritual center. A church within the complex began operations several years ago (Devyatkin, 2026). There are differing opinions in society regarding this construction project, and the issue has reached the country's parliament (Bekbolayeva, 2026). At the same time, the building permit was issued in 2018-2019.

For comparison, the following figures may be cited: in 1956, there were 55 Orthodox parishes operating in the Kazakh SSR. According to data from the 2012 re-registration of religious associations, this number had increased to 261 and currently exceed 300. The number of adherents of the Metropolitan District is estimated at approximately 4 million, distributed across all regions of the republic.

The organizational successor to the pre-revolutionary Orenburg, Omsk (Tobolsk, Tomsk), and Turkestan dioceses is the Kazakhstan Metropolitan District of the Russian Orthodox Church, established by a decision of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church on May 7, 2003. Between 2003 and 2011, the organizational and administrative structure of the Russian Orthodox Church in Kazakhstan underwent significant reforms. The Metropolitan District of the Russian Orthodox Church in Kazakhstan was established on the basis of three dioceses. The number of dioceses subsequently increased from three to nine: Astana and Almaty, Uralsk, Shymkent, Karaganda, Kostanay, Pavlodar, Kokshetau, Petropavlovsk-Bulayevo, and Ust-Kamenogorsk. In 2022, the tenth diocese, the Aktobe Diocese was established (Metropolitan District of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Republic of Kazakhstan, n.d.).

The head of the Orthodox Church in Kazakhstan is Metropolitan Alexander of Astana and Kazakhstan. According to the official website, he is a citizen of Russia, where he served in various dioceses for over 30 years. He receives state awards from his country. He is also a member of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church and regularly attends its meetings. According to the official website, he meets with high-ranking officials of Kazakhstan (Metropolitan District of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Republic of Kazakhstan, n.d.). Kazakhstani Orthodox clergy residing in the country also receive state awards of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Overall, all structural units of the Church are interconnected and operate on the basis of common internal regulations, documents and under unified leadership.

Missionary activity of the Russian Orthodox Church among the Kazakh population

Organized missionary activity among the indigenous population of the Kazakh Steppe developed during the second half of the 19th century within the framework of the so-called Kirghiz Mission, initially established as a branch of the Altai Ecclesiastical Mission of the Tomsk Diocese and later operating under the jurisdiction of the Omsk and Orenburg dioceses (Altaiskaia tserkovnaia missiia, 1865). In the Orenburg Diocese, the development of mission stations was formally discussed and supported by the Holy Synod in the 1890s, including plans for stations in the Turgai and Ural regions (GAOrO, F. 175, File 3, p. 7; RGIA, F. 796, File 2987a, pp. 1–3). For example: the Bukonsky, Bolshe-Narymsky, Dolonsky, and Shulbinsky stans (Tomsk Diocese), as well as the stans of the Orenburg and Omsk dioceses in the west of the region.

The experience of the earliest baptisms among the indigenous population reveals that difficulties arose; for instance, converts to Christianity often concealed their intention to be baptized from relatives and fellow believers, fearing pressure from the community. Archival records document cases in which baptism followed prolonged interaction with the Russian population. One documented case involved the twenty-year-old Tatar Husnaddin Habibulin, who was baptized in Akmolinsk on 6 November 1894 and received the Christian name Nikolai (Putintsev, 1894, p. 427). According to archival data, Archimandrite Makariy (Glukharev), the head of the Altai Mission, baptized approximately 1,500 “inorodtsy” (a historical imperial administrative category referring to non-Russian indigenous people) during his thirteen years of service. In the Tobolsk Diocese, approximately 140 people were baptized by Orthodox clergy between 1860 and 1865 (GAOmO, F. 64, File 595, p. 38). These data demonstrate the limited scale of the Christianization of the steppe population. Some converted to Christianity to obtain benefits and privileges.

The baptism of indigenous inhabitants was also subject to changing administrative procedures and negotiations between ecclesiastical and civil authorities (SGA RK, F. 4, File 2110, pp. 1–2, 5–6; F. 4, File 3039, pp. 1–3).

In addition, proselytizing activities were organized within the framework of parochial schools that operated according to the methodology of the Orthodox educator and missionary N. Ilminsky (GAOrO, F. 175, File 153a, p. 14; File 5, pp. 55–56; File 11a, p. 5). Children were taught the Russian alphabet, reading, arithmetic, writing, Church Slavonic reading, church singing, and the catechism. Consequently, having learned the Russian script, the indigenous inhabitants would be unable to read Arabic or receive religious instruction. These facts are reflected in the correspondence between Y. Altynsarin and N. Ilminsky. The Kazakh enlightener employed pedagogical methods but opposed the Christianization of the Kazakhs. Y. Altynsarin did not deny religion, considered moral education important and wrote the work Muslim Guide (Musylmanshylyqtyn tutqasy) to explain the foundations of Islam (Altynsarin, 1884).

Overall, the ultimate outcome of the missionary work should be characterized as limited. The missionary efforts did not result in the large-scale Christianization of the Kazakh population, as most converts were drawn from low-income groups or consisted of individuals who had maintained prolonged economic and everyday contact with Russian settlers, such as hired workers and agricultural laborers). Among the factors limiting the mission's effectiveness, the sources identify the vast expanses of the steppe and the travel difficulties, a shortage of missionary personnel, the resilience of the traditional family-clan social structures, and the resistance of Tatar mullahs, whose influence the Russian administration was unable to fully overcome. Following the 1905 manifesto on religious toleration, which permitted conversion from Orthodoxy to other faiths, a significant number of previously baptized Kazakhs returned to Islam; consequently, missionaries focused less on new baptisms and more on retaining those who had already converted to Orthodoxy. The October Revolution of 1917 and the subsequent cessation of state funding led to the de facto dissolution of the Kyrgyz Mission (Fedorov, 2003). Nevertheless, despite years of an atheistic regime and repressions against believers and religious leaders, the activities of religious organizations continued and contributed to the emergence of other forms of religious expression. The missionary work of the Russian Orthodox Church continues today; it follows various paths and is conducted in accordance with the legislation of Kazakhstan through 348 registered Orthodox associations and in 311 Orthodox churches. 20 Orthodox missionaries were registered for the fourth quarter of 2024 (Committee for Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024). The authorized body has not published up-to-date statistics on missionaries broken down by denomination. Missionary activity continues to target not only the Slavic population but also the country's indigenous population. Research by scholars in Kazakhstan shows that Kazakhs, Uyghurs, Uzbeks are involved in some churches, while some clergy members use the Kazakh language during religious services (Malgarayeva & Kamarova, 2024, p. 337).

A comparative analysis reveals that, while missionary activity during the imperial period was organized and funded directly by the Most Holy Synod and diocesan authorities, acting in close coordination with the state administration, in modern Kazakhstan, missionary work is a form of religious activity subject to mandatory state registration, regardless of the missionary's denominational affiliation.

In modern times, Orthodox missionaries account for less than 5% of the total number of officially registered missionaries in the country, a significantly lower figure than that of representatives from other Christian denominations, such as Catholicism and Pentecostal churches. However, this does not mean that the church does not engage in missionary work. Thus, official documents indicate that missionary activity follows clear trajectories, which are reflected in documents. The following

presents selected excerpts from "The Specifics features of the Contemporary Missionary Field of the Russian Orthodox Church", published on the official website of the Moscow Patriarchate:

"The question of the state of the contemporary missionary field is crucial for determining the direction, methods, and approaches for the development of the Orthodox mission. Over the past 800 years, the Russian Orthodox Church has never before faced the need to undertake apostolic preaching on such a scale, with the missionary field encompassing millions of people who have been liberated from the yoke of atheistic ideology and who inhabit vast territories characterized by their own cultural and historical specifics. A paradoxical situation has emerged in which there is a need for a "second Christianization" of the peoples living within the Russian Orthodox Church's pastoral responsibility, and the scale of this "second Christianization" is unprecedented. Recognition of this phenomenon gives rise to many of the distinctive features and objectives of contemporary missionary activity".

Furthermore, one of the key missionary tasks identified is finding the conditions for the Christianization of national cultures based on their constructive elements. (Russian Orthodox Church, 2007). Like other religious organizations, the Orthodox Church is also actively present in the media landscape and on social networks and conducts social initiatives (Malgarayeva & Kamarova, 2024, p. 340).

The findings of this research suggest that the expansion of the Russian Orthodox Church in Kazakhstan during the imperial period resulted from two interrelated but distinct processes: the administrative, military and migrate colonization of the Steppe, which provided a substantial Russian Orthodox population, and deliberate but limited missionary efforts among the indigenous, predominantly Muslim population. Notably, in the Turkestan Diocese, where Islam had the strongest institutional and social position and the imperial administration placed particular emphasis on maintaining political stability, missionary wasn't active in contrast to the northern and northeastern regions, where the Kyrgyz Mission was more active. Comparing historical data with modern statistics reveals both continuity and a qualitative gap between the two eras. While the spread of Orthodoxy in the pre-revolutionary period served as an instrument of imperial integration and Russification, the status of religious associations in independent Kazakhstan is defined by the principle of the equality of faiths before the law, as enshrined in the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On Religious Activity and Religious Associations" of October 11, 2011 (Republic of Kazakhstan, 2011).

According to the 2021 census, 69.31% of Kazakhstan's population practice Islam and 17.19% practice Christianity; of the latter, over 3.26 million people identified as Orthodox Christians (Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023). By comparison, the 2009 census recorded 70% Muslims and 26% Christians; the decline in the share of the Christian population during the intercensal period reflects both demographic processes (the emigration of the Slavic and German populations) and changes in statistical recording methodology. In other words, the figure of 26% represents the country's entire Christian population, without a breakdown by denomination. At the same time, it is necessary to consider global and regional political restructuring, which resulted in an influx of Slavic population from warring states (Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2026). Over time, this influx of migrants declined, as some relocated to other Central Asian countries or further abroad, while others who remained in Kazakhstan (Viktorova, 2022).

An analysis of the data reveals a long-standing presence of Christianity, including Orthodoxy in the Kazakh Steppes, as well as a broad institutional legacy. However, although Orthodoxy did not historically become the predominant religion among the indigenous population, it remains the country's second-largest religious denomination in terms of the number of registered religious associations and places of worship.

https://doi.org/10.65608/qut.2026.3.01

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that Christianity in Central Asia has historical roots, just like other religions (Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Judaism, etc.). The emergence and growth of the Russian Orthodox Church in the territory of present-day Kazakhstan were closely linked to the gradual consolidation of imperial authority over the Kazakh lands, beginning with the establishment of Russian protection in the 1730s, and subsequently the expansion of administrative control. The formation of ecclesiastical-administrative structures followed the expansion of the Russian Empire's borders and the trajectories of military-settler colonization in the Kazakh steppe, primarily serving the spiritual needs of the region's growing Russian and Cossack population. Subsequently, the three established dioceses encompassed the territories of the three Kazakh Zhuzes. The West (Junior Zhuz) fell under the Orenburg Diocese; the North and Northeast (Middle Zhuz and part of the Senior Zhuz) were served successively by the Tobolsk, Tomsk, and Omsk dioceses; and the South and Southeast were covered by the Turkestan Diocese (established following the expansion of the empire's borders in the 1860s, uniting parishes previously under the jurisdiction of the Orenburg and Tomsk dioceses). At the same time, as this study has shown, missionary activity within the Kazakh steppe was not uniform; there were regional variations regarding timing, methods, and organization. In some instances, missionary work was not undertaken due to the strong position of Islam and the need for stability. One of the goals was the Russification of the indigenous population, an objective achieved to varying degrees across different regions of Kazakhstan. Despite the establishment of a network of missionary stans, this did not lead to mass conversion to Orthodoxy. The primary restraining factors were the entrenched position of Islam and the institutions of traditional society, a shortage of missionary personnel, the vastness of the steppe expanses, and the activities of the Tatar clergy. Following the adoption of the Manifesto of 1905, some who had already been baptized returned to their former faith, and missionary activity shifted its focus to retaining those who had already converted to Christianity. During the Soviet era, religious activity was persecuted, leaders were subjected to repression, and a policy of forced secularization was implemented. In contemporary Kazakhstan, the Slavic ethnic groups are declining, while the number of Orthodox churches continues to increase. New dioceses are being established, new church complexes are being constructed, and the Seminary continue to train clergy and other church personnel. It can be concluded that missionary work among the Kazakhs did not lead to mass conversion, whereas the institutional establishment of the Russian Orthodox Church in the region proved enduring precisely where it relied on a large Slavic population. At the same time, as has been shown, missionary work is actively being carried out among the local population in modern times.

Comparing historical findings with current official statistics from authorized bodies confirms that the modern structure of Orthodoxy in Kazakhstan is primarily an institutional legacy of the Russian and Slavic presence in the region, rather than the result of the pre-revolutionary missionary Christianization of the Kazakhs. Data on registered religious associations and places of worship indicate a transition from an active synodal missionary model to a stable, predominantly parish-based form of Orthodox ecclesiastical organization in Kazakhstan. Thus, the Russian Orthodox Church had a long historical path, from the total state oversight imposed by the 18th-century reforms to the contemporary legal framework, in which the non-interference of state in church affairs is enshrined and guarantees by law.

Conflict of interests

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

https://doi.org/10.65608/qut.2026.3.01

Archival Sources

Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan (SGA RK)

Fond 1, File 6461.

Fond 4, File 2110.

Fond 4, File 3039.

Fond 64, File 125.

Fond 387, File 129.

State Archive of the Omsk Region (GAOmO)

Fond 3, File 11259.

Fond 64, File 595.

State Archive of the Orenburg Region (GAOrO)

Fond 175, File 3.

Fond 175, File 5.

Fond 175, File 11a.

Fond 175, File 153a.

Fond 175, File 158.

Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA)

Fond 796, File 1573.

Fond 796, File 2987a.

Fond 821, File 594.

Russian State Military Historical Archive (RGVIA)

Fond 330, File 52.

References

Achilov, D., & Shaykhutdinov, R. (2013). State Regulation of Religion and Radicalism in the Post-Communist Muslim Republics. *Problems of Post-Communism, 60*(5), 17–33. https://doi.org/10.2753/PPC1075-8216600502

Alekseenko, N. V., & Alekseenko, V. S. (2009). *Slavianskoe naselenie Kazakhstana XVIII–XX vv.: Istoriko-demograficheskoe issledovanie* [The Slavic population of Kazakhstan in the 18th–20th centuries: A historical and demographic study]. Media-Alians. (in Russian)

Alektorov, A. E. (1892). *Materialy dlia izucheniia strany, istorii i byta kirgizov* [Materials for the study of the country, history, and way of life of the Kyrgyz]. (in Russian)

Almaty Orthodox Theological Seminary. (n.d.). *Vospitatel'skiy sovet* [Educational Council]. https://seminaria.kz/vospitatelskiy-sovet/ (in Russian)

Altaiskaia tserkovnaia missiia. (1865). *Altaiskaia tserkovnaia missiia: Posviashchaetsia osnovateliam pervago v otechestve Missionerskago obshchestva odnim iz ego chlenov* [The Altai Ecclesiastical Mission: Dedicated by one of its members to the founders of the first missionary society in Russia]. Tipografiia Doma prizreniia maloletnikh bednykh. (in Russian)

Altayeva, N. (2017). Mormons church structure and service. *Eurasian Journal of Religious Studies, 10*(2), 16–22.

Altynsarin, Y. (1884). *Musylmanshylyqtyn tutqasy* [The foundations of Islam]. Kazan University Press. (in Kazakh)

Antipin, A., & Abdrakhmanov, S. (2026). The Role of Religion in the Identity of Kazakhstan's Cossacks: History and Narratives. *QUT JOURNAL OF RELIGION, PHILOSOPHY AND CULTURE, 1*(2), 26–42. https://doi.org/10.65608/qut.2026.2.03

Apollova, N. (1948). *Prisoedinenie Kazakhstana k Rossii v 30-kh godakh XVIII veka* [The incorporation of Kazakhstan into Russia in the 1730s]. Izdatelstvo Akademii nauk Kazakhskoi SSR. (in Russian)

Asanbaev, M., (2006). Kazakhstan: Potentsial religioznoi konfliktnosti i faktory riska v razvitii religioznoi situatsii [Kazakhstan: Potential for religious conflict and risk factors in the development of the religious situation]. *Central Asia and the Caucasus, 6*(48), 87–100. (in Russian)

Bekbolayeva, D. (2026, February 5). *V Astane stroyat krupneishuiu tserkov v TsA – deputaty protiv* [The largest church in Central Asia is being built in Astana — MPs oppose]. TopNews.kg. https://topnews.kg/exclusive/102787-v-astane-strojat-krupnejshuju-cerkov-v-ca-deputaty-protiv.html (in Russian)

Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan. (2023). *National composition, religion, and language proficiency in the Republic of Kazakhstan: Results of the 2021 National Population Census of the Republic of Kazakhstan.* https://stat.gov.kz/en/national/2021/

Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan. (2026). *Chislennost' naseleniya Respubliki Kazakhstan po otdel'nym etnosam i vozrastnym gruppam (na nachalo 2026g.)* [Population of the Republic of Kazakhstan by selected ethnic groups and age groups (at the beginning of 2026)]. https://stat.gov.kz/ru/industries/social-statistics/demography/publications/281565/ (in Russian)

Committee for Religious Affairs of the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan. (2024). *Religioznaya sfera* [Religious sphere]. https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/din/activities/141?lang=ru (in Russian)

Devyatkin, D. (2026, February 3). *Pravoslavnyi gorodok s khramom, shkolami i ozdorovitelnymi tsentrami stroyat v Astane* [An Orthodox town with a church, schools, and health centers is being built in Astana]. Kursiv. https://kz.kursiv.media/2026-02-03/devy-pravoslavnyi-gorodok-s-hramom-shkolami-i-ozdorovitelnymi-czentrami-stroyat-v-astane/ (in Russian)

Exclusive.kz. (2026, February 4). *V Kazakhstane opublikovany dannyye o religioznoy sfere za 2025 god* [Data on Kazakhstan's religious sphere for 2025 published]. https://exclusive.kz/v-kazahstane-opublikovany-dannye-o-religioznoj-sfere-za-2025-god/ (in Russian)

Fedorov, V. A. (2003). *Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov i gosudarstvo: Sinodalnyi period, 1700–1917* [The Russian Orthodox Church and the state: The Synodal period, 1700–1917]. (in Russian)

Ganje, A. (2019). Kazakhstan. In K. R. Ross, D. Jeyaraj, & T. M. Johnson (Eds.), *Christianity in South and Central Asia* (pp. 43–51). Edinburgh University Press.

Kenzhegulov, N. (2019). *Kazakistan'a Rus Ortodoks Hristiyanlığının girişi, yayılışı ve misyonerlik faaliyetleri* [The entry, spread and missionary activities of Russian Orthodox Christianity in Kazakhstan] [Doctoral dissertation, Erciyes University]. (in Turkish)

Kenzhegulov, N. (2025). Orenburg eprxiyasynyn qurylu jane Batys Qazaqstan aumagyndagy orys pravoslavie shirkeulerinin taraluy [The formation of the Orenburg diocese and the spread of Russian orthodox churches in Western Kazakhstan]. *JETE – Journal of Philosophy, Religious and Cultural Studies, 151*(2), 139–152. https://doi.org/10.32523/3080-1281-2025-151-2-139-152 (in Kazakh)

Kussainova, G. S. (2011). Pravoslavie v konfessionalnoi palitre sovremennogo Kazakhstana: Printsipy vzaimodeistviia s gosudarstvom i mezhkonfessionalnye otnosheniia s islamom [Orthodoxy in the confessional landscape of contemporary Kazakhstan: Principles of interaction with the state and interfaith relations with Islam]. *Rusnauka.com.* https://www.rusnauka.com/21_NTP_2011/Politologia/2_90596.doc.htm (in Russian)

Laurelle, M. (2021). Soft power of Russia: sources, goals and channels of influence. *Russie. Nei. Visions, 122,* 5–30.

Malgarayeva, Z., & Kamarova, R. (2024). Osnovnyye trendy razvitiya khristianstva v Kazakhstane [Main trends in the development of Christianity in Kazakhstan]. *BULLETIN of the L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University Historical sciences Philosophy Religion Series, 148*(3), 329–343. https://doi.org/10.32523/2616-7255-2024-148-3-329-343 (in Russian)

Malgarayeva, Z., Temirbayeva, A., Kenzhegulov, N., & Alimkulova, S. (2025). "Soft Power" of Orthodox Church in Kazakhstan: Narratives, Objectives, Potential. *Journal of Religious & Theological Information, 24*(1), 28–40. https://doi.org/10.1080/10477845.2024.2316440

Marmontova, T. (2016). Khristianstvo v sovremennom Kazakhstane [Christianity in modern Kazakhstan]. *Kazakhstan-Spectr, 76*(2), 56–73. (in Russian)

Metropolitan District of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Republic of Kazakhstan. (n.d.). *Official website.* https://mitropolia.kz/

Metropolitan District of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Republic of Kazakhstan. (n.d.). *Yeparkhii Kazakhstanskogo mitropolich'yego okruga* [Dioceses of the Kazakhstan Metropolitan District]. https://mitropolia.kz/info/organizations/diocese.html (in Russian)

Nikolsky, N. M. (1985). *Istoriya Russkoi tserkvi* [History of the Russian Church]. (in Russian)

Peyrouse, S. (2004). Christianity and nationality in Soviet and post-Soviet Central Asia: Mutual intrusions and instrumentalizations. *Nationalities Papers, 32*(3), 651–674. https://doi.org/10.1080/0090599042000246433

Podoprigora, R. (2013). Religious education in Kazakhstan. In D. Davis & E. Miroshnikova (Eds.), *The Routledge international handbook of religious education* (pp. 191–196). Routledge.

Republic of Kazakhstan. (2011). *Dini qyzmet jane dini byrlestykter turaly Qazaqstan Respublikasynyn Zany* [Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on religious activities and religious associations] (No. 483-IV). https://adilet.zan.kz/kaz/docs/Z1100000483 (in Kazakh)

Russian Orthodox Church. (2007). *Kontseptsiya missionerskoy deyatel'nosti Russkoy Pravoslavnoy Tserkvi* [Concept of the missionary activity of the Russian Orthodox Church. Moscow Patriarchate]. https://mospat.ru/en/documents/178-kontseptsiya-missionerskoy-deyatelnosti-russkoy-pravoslavnoy-tserkvi/ (in Russian)

Rysbekova, Sh. S., Kurmanalieva, A. D., & Meirbaev, B. B. (2016). *Khristianstvo v Kazakhstane: Istoriya i sovremennost'* [Christianity in Kazakhstan: History and contemporary period]. Qazaq University. (in Russian)

Shapoval, Y. V. (2020). The model of the secular state and the politics of secularism in Kazakhstan: Modern challenges. *Relihiina svoboda,* (24), 65–73. https://doi.org/10.32420/rs.2020.24.2111

Trofimov, Y., & Ivanov, V. (2006). *Khristianstvo v Kazakhstane* [Christianity in Kazakhstan]. Saran. (in Russian)

Viktorova, P. (2022, November 30). *How the number of believers has changed in Kazakhstan.* Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting (CABAR). https://belief.cabar.asia/en/2022/11/30/how-the-number-of-believers-changed-in-kazakhstan

Weller, R. C. (2014). Religious-cultural revivalism as historiographical debate: Contending claims in the post-Soviet Kazakh context. *Journal of Islamic Studies, 25*(2), 138–177. https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/ett058

Yerzhan, K., Mamyrbayev, D., & Karibekuly, Y. (2026). Religious conversion from Islam to Christianity in Kazakhstan. *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe, 46*(2), 109–128. https://doi.org/10.55221/2693-2229.2716

Zhapekova, G. K., Kabidenova, Z. D., Rysbekova, S., Ramazanova, A., & Biyazdykova, K. (2018). Peculiarities of religious identity formation in the history of Kazakhstan. *European Journal of Science and Theology, 14*(2), 109–119.

Znamenskii, P. V. (1880). *Rukovodstvo k russkoi tserkovnoi istorii* [A guide to Russian Church history]. (in Russian)

Information about authors

Nurmukhamed Kenzhegulov – PhD, Egyptian University of Islamic Culture Nur-Mubarak, Almaty, Kazakhstan, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6698-6640, noorken@mail.ru

Авторлар туралы мәлімет

Нұрмұхамед Кенжегулов – PhD, Нұр-Мүбарак Египет ислам мәдениеті университеті, Алматы, Қазақстан, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6698-6640, noorken@mail.ru

Сведения об авторах

Нурмухамед Кенжегулов – PhD, Египетский университет исламской культуры Нур-Мубарак, Алматы, Казахстан, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6698-6640, noorken@mail.ru

https://doi.org/10.65608/qut.2026.3.01