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TOPIC: MODERN CHRISTIANITY IN CENTRAL ASIA

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ABSTRACT

This article briefly describes the development of Christian denominations after the independence of Central Asian countries, the attitude of states and governments to these religious denominations.

KEYWORDS: *Christianity, Central Asia, Russian Orthodox Church, Kazakhstan, Archbishop Alexy Kutepov, Lutheran,Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, the Catholic Church, the Fergana Valley, Samarkand.*

MODERN CHRISTIANITY IN CENTRAL ASIA

Although Muslim traditions have been deeply rooted in the territories occupied by the five Central Asian countries for several centuries, at the same time, since the 19th century, the position of the representatives of the minority Christian religion has been felt in this region. In some parts of the region, their importance remains high. Also, each of the three main Christian denominations in Central Asia has its own history and national characteristics. Although the Christians of the region have many unique aspects, they also have common aspects. For example, almost all of them have the experience of getting rid of the Soviet-era practice of atheism and falling into the position of a religious minority in the region.[1]

In general, the current state of Christianity in Central Asia can be interpreted as a consequence of the freedom of conscience achieved during the period of independence. However, the history of the region indicates something else - its long Christian past. Now that's another topic. The existence of Christian churches and denominations is nothing new for Central Asia.

Today, the Russian Orthodox Church remains the leading Christian denomination, despite significant migration of the Russian minority, which is part of the population of Central Asia, to the historical homeland of the Russians. Its territory in Central Asia is administratively divided into two diocesan administrations: the first works within Kazakhstan, and the second covers four other republics.[2]The administration of the Diocese of Tashkent and Central Asia, which is centered in Tashkent, is headed by Vladimir Ikim. As of September 1, 1996, one hundred churches were operating in the territory of the Central Asian diocese under the leadership of the office. At that time, there were about 30 churches in Uzbekistan, most of them (Navoi, Zarafshan, Uchquduq, Karshida) were recently completed. Also, 5 churches were built in Tajikistan, 8 in Turkmenistan (two in Ashgabat), and about 50 in Kyrgyzstan.

On March 30, 1999, the management structure of the Christian religion in Kazakhstan was changed: a new diocese of Astana-Almaty was established under the leadership of Archbishop

Alexy Kutepov. The diocese is subject to three subordinate structures that take care of the entire territory of the republic. The number of Orthodox churches in Kazakhstan continues to grow: if in 1989 there were 90 Christian churches in the republic, in 1996 their number was 185, and in 1998 there were 212.[3]There are also 8 monasteries in Kazakhstan today.

There are also Lutheran communities and churches in Central Asia. For example, there are 180 Lutheran communities in Kazakhstan, mainly in the north of the republic.[4] In Kyrgyzstan in the mid-1990s, 21 Lutheran societies were registered, while in Uzbekistan it is only 6.[5]The largest of them operates in Tashkent. They mainly consist of Germans living in the capital of Uzbekistan, as well as an increasing number of Russians. Although other Lutheran communities in Uzbekistan, mainly located in the Fergana Valley, have united mainly elderly people of German nationality, unfortunately they are gradually disappearing. Finally, there is not a single officially registered Lutheran community in Turkmenistan. In Tajikistan, attempts are being made to create several churches and communities at the same time.

The Catholic Church is one of the official churches in Central Asia. But the position of Catholics in different republics is very different. The strongest position of Catholicism is in Kazakhstan, whose authorities signed an agreement with the Vatican on October 24, 1998.[4]This gave Kazakh Catholics (as well as Orthodox) the right to conduct church and charity work, and work in the field of education. Today, the Catholic Church in Kazakhstan is very active: it creates interest groups, organizes events for children, teenagers and adults. Today, there are about 80 churches in Kazakhstan that unite about 300,000 Catholics.[5] They employ at least 60 priests, and most interestingly, most of these priests are foreigners (mainly Poles, Germans, Italians and Koreans).

Catholic places of worship are also mainly concentrated in Kazakhstan. Other countries in the region were left out of the revival and expansion of Catholicism for various reasons, including political ones. With the exception of Kazakhstan, nowhere else has a single bishop been established, the Catholic Church is everywhere represented only by a mission. If other currents of Christianity are experiencing a certain rise in Kyrgyzstan, the Catholic Church is in a much more difficult situation, it is experiencing difficulties in relations with the authorities. Bishkek has a modest Catholic Church and only a few communities outside the capital. In Uzbekistan, Catholics have one church in Samarkand and several communities in the Fergana Valley, in addition to a large community in Tashkent. In Tajikistan, missionaries are trying to spread the Catholic religion through their offices in Dushanbe, as well as in the south of the republic. In Turkmenistan, the Catholic Church generally has an ambiguous, semi-official status. Local Catholics gather in a chapel led by an apostolic nuncio. In 1995, there were 30,000 Catholics in Turkmenistan.

After the countries of the region gained independence, in 1991-1992, constitutions were adopted declaring freedom of conscience, equality of all religions and beliefs before the law, and the separation of religious organizations from the state. None of the local constitutions mentions the superiority of one religious doctrine over another, and none of the basic laws contain the words "Quran", "Islam", "Muslim" or "Christianity". In addition, the leaders of the new countries emphasize in their speeches or written statements that Islam and Christianity coexist peacefully in the same area.

In Central Asian countries, religious legislation requires all religious denominations not to interfere in politics. No party can participate in the election based on a religious program. Although this demand is mainly directed against certain Muslim movements seeking power, it is considered to be applicable to all religious movements.[6]

Now let's talk briefly about the attention and views of the country's government on Christianity in Central Asian countries after independence.

Turkmenistan. Liberalization in the field of religion has been minimal here. Former President Niyazov did not ban Christianity, but transformed the religious landscape of his country into a simple scheme: every religious Turkmen must be a Muslim; every European, whether Russian, German or Polish, was called to join the ranks of the Orthodox Church. According to the new law, any religious community must collect 500 signatures to register. Due to the small number of non-Russian national minorities (most Poles and Germans have left the territory of Turkmenistan), Christian movements are forced to exist semi-legally, even in the capital. All of them, with the exception of Orthodoxy and Catholicism, are subject to constant administrative and police pressure.

Tajikistan. The civil war caused a general exodus of the European minority (as well as the Tajik population), and despite the return of some Russians, Christianity has a very limited following in this republic. In Tajikistan, in addition to the Orthodox, there are representatives of Baptists and Catholics. Not only Europeans, but also Tajiks are trying to lose their previous opportunities through humanitarian aid and missionary activities.

Uzbekistan. The influence of Islam is strong in this country, the emigration of Slavs and Europeans remains significant. In 1998, new religious legislation was passed requiring 100 signatures from its members to re-register a religious community. The new policy led to the disappearance of a large number of Christian communities operating outside Tashkent. The only exceptions left in the country were the Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church in Samarkand, and some Protestant communities concentrated in large cities. Despite the ban on proselytizing, Protestant denominations are very active: Baptists and Adventists convert people to their faith, and their churches in Tashkent are still full of followers today.[7]

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. These republics are experiencing a real flowering of Christianity. For example, in Bishkek, since 1990, many synagogues have been opened. In every major city of the republic, there are representatives of Protestant denominations, Protestant religious buildings were built even in the mountainous regions of the republic, as well as in the southern part, where the position of Islam is traditionally strong. The number of believers is increasing in churches, especially in cities. During Gorbachev's time, there were only about 200 "Jehovah's followers" in Bishkek, today there are 4,000 in their ranks. The situation is approximately the same in Kazakhstan. Protestant missionaries flock there, Slavs and other European minorities are still important there, and religious freedom is widely recognized.

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