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A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY OF CONVERSIONS IN KAZAKHSTAN

Kazakh society went through such policies as Russification and Christianization during the Russian occupation period, atheism during the Soviets period, and religious revival after its independence. After the independence, missionary work of the Christian religion along with Islam increased. As a result of the missionary activities that are increasing today, Kazakhs who have changed their religion have started to appear in the society. This research explores the Kazakhs who changed their religion as a result of the intensive missionary work that emerged after independence from a sociological perspective.

Then, the qualitative research method of sociology was used to investigate the current and complex events of religious change. There are three (complementary) techniques that we have used in qualitative research. They are: Interview, document examination and observation. In our research, 25 individuals were interviewed and personal information about them was provided. The process of changing religion and the reasons they changed religion were examined.

Keywords: Kazakhstan, Conversion, Christianization, Missionary, Sociology of religion, Social change.

Introduction

This study addresses Kazakh religious converts in Kazakhstan, and the problem of conversion using a sociological approach. A case where devoid of the religion of the family or nation in which an individual was born and experiencing religious socialization in another religion is defined as conversion.

Religion change, conversion to religion is referred to as «conversion» in the West [1, 139 p.]. Conversion is used in a broad sense, such as converting from

one religion to another, converting to a different sect within a religion, becoming religious when a person is atheist, being irreligious while belonging to a religion, or starting to fulfil religious requirements while not doing something belonging to the religion to which one belongs. A person who converts is called «convert» [2, 160 p.].

Issues such as conversion and returning to religion are the common intriguing topics of sociologists and psychologists, theologians and historians today. Studies on the phenomenon of conversion were first conducted by psychologist scientists in the West [3, 12 p.]. Psychoanalytic Freud, on the other hand, saw the process of conversion as a defensive reaction against the explosion of «Oedipal hatred» in his article «Religious Conversion». He emphasized that aggressive impulses against the actual father are connected by God. Conversion Oedipal said it was a defensive reaction to increased anger [4, 44 p.].

It is apparent that there has been a change in this regard after 1960. One of the most important factors of this change is the emergence of new religious movements. It has been observed that with the widespread use of these movements, the incidents of conversion have increased. After these events, a different approach to the phenomenon of conversion began. After these experiences, it was understood that a very complex phenomenon such as conversion is inadequate from a religious and psychological perspective; The importance of dealing with the issue of conversion with a sociological approach has been recognized. With the emergence of new religious movements, theories such as brainwashing emerged and sociologists began to concentrate on conversion. Especially the emergence of new religious movements has updated this issue even more.

«Becoming a World Saver, A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective» by John Lofland and Rodney Stark has been one of the most popular and controversial studies in sociological terms [5, 28 p.]. L. R. Rombo (1993, 1999, 2010, 2012) has been working on conversion over ten years. L. R. Rombo has put forward many theories about conversion. [6, 6 p.]. In Kazakhstan, until today, there are no one who research this subject in sociological terms. Therefore, this research we do is a current issue.

Main Chapter

The main indicators of the social identity of Kazakhs who converted to Christianity today have been determined. 25 Christian Kazakhs who were born in various cities of Kazakhstan but continue to live in the capital city of Nur-Sultan participated in this research. 60 % of the 25 subjects who participated in the interview were women and 40 % were men.

The society in which the individual was born and raised is a very important factor in conversion. Conversion to Christianity is not a common phenomenon

in a Christian-free society. Religious pluralism has a positive effect on religious conversion. In villages where there are no churches, there are no converts to Christians. Therefore, whether or not to be born in regions where Christians live a lot, whether or not to live in these regions, Christianization also emerges as an important dynamic.

About 44 % of our subjects were born in the North Kazakhstan region. Since the capital Nur-Sultan is close to the Northern Kazakhstan region and the North of Kazakhstan is the region where Christians (Russians) live most, the number of Christian Kazakhs is high in this region. 32 % of the subjects were born in South Kazakhstan. South Kazakhstan region is the most populated region of Kazakhstan. Those born in East Kazakhstan are 14 %. The rate of subjects born in the West Kazakhstan region is 10 %.

Especially the fact that 44 % of the sample was born in Northern Kazakhstan reminds us of the social interaction theory based on geographic proximity. It also increases social interactions and cultural exchanges in the nearby geography. It also shows its effect in Christianization that people are living beings according to face to face.

Around 56 % of the converts grew up in the city. While the rate of those grown in the village is 28 %, those grown in the town are 16 %. Today, there are not many churches in the villages of Kazakhstan. Missionaries operate in densely populated cities. For this reason, people living in villages are less likely to convert. Churches are also rare in towns where Russians live. Those who grew up in the village and town convert after they come to the city.

Approximately 92 % of our subjects emphasize that they did not receive information about religious issues from their families in their childhood. Only 8 % of them stated that they received religious information from their family in their childhood. It is revealed that those who converted to religion in Kazakhstan society do not have a serious knowledge on religious issues.

Lack of religious knowledge within the family can be considered as an effective factor in conversion. It was determined that almost all of the sample did not provide religious information in the family. If they had learned a certain amount of religious knowledge in the family, would they still convert is a matter of debate. However, in this study, there seem to be strong links between the inability of the family to provide religious education and conversion. On the other hand, considering that families acquired their religious culture during the USSR period, it becomes clear that they raised their children like themselves.

Kazakhstan is a secular state and many religions coexist; No specific religion is taught by the state in the country. On the other hand, the hard work of the missionaries also affects the society that does not have enough of its local religion.

76 % of our subjects who participated in our research confirmed that they do not have enough knowledge about Islam by answering «no». 24 % of them answered «partially» to this question. There are none who answer «yes». It was revealed that among the converting Kazakhs, he did not have enough knowledge about the religion of Islam.

Based on the sample, we can say that religious ignorance is effective in converting religion. As a matter of fact, none of the subjects had satisfactory knowledge about Islam. So there is a relationship between conversion and religious ignorance. In addition, missionaries can reach individuals who do not have religious knowledge more easily. It is easy to fill the empty mind. Of course, it will be more difficult to persuade those who have knowledge.

Mr. Ermek: Before I became a Christian, I had no knowledge of Islam. Religion was not taught in the family. My father is an atheist and my mother is White Russian. They didn't know anything about Islam. I had no chance to get information about Islam from my family.

As mentioned in the interviews, those who converted are under the influence of atheism or have taken the traditional understanding of Islam only in certain sections with the influence of the elderly, mostly as a memory of childhood. Mixed marriages, as in the case of Mr. Ermek, especially the «main» figure being Russian, already initiates a cultural breakdown within the family. As can be seen in the theoretical part, living under Russian sovereignty, Russification through education, missionary activities that reinforce this accelerated the dissolution of Kazakh religion and national identity. Therefore, the recent history of a society is closely related to the conversion tendencies in that society.

In the research, it has been determined that the events that are effective in converting religion vary. 24 % of the subjects stated that the main factor in conversion and the factor that is effective in decision-making is «to read the Bible and to know the Lord». 44 % of them say that they decided to convert to Christianity after getting to know those who belonged to Christianity. The rate of those who said they had dreams and miracle events is 12 %. 8 % stated that there was no incident. According to the pattern captured in the sample, in the study area, the Bible and social interaction factors with Christian individuals stand out in Christianization.

People who have no religious knowledge and are seeking may be impressed when they read religious texts. The influence of religious texts can lead directly to conversion. For this reason, it is also an important activity for missionaries to distribute Bibles in the streets. Those who go to the Bible are those who seek. Those who seek God or the meaning of life. If his close circle had taught him what the Buddha taught, perhaps he would have become a Buddhist. It turns out that

meeting a particular scripture here is also related to the socio-cultural environment. Things that seem interesting, meaningful, or poignant to them in the Bible are things that can be found in more or less every religious teaching. Therefore, here, «readiness» seems to take priority over the Bible. Meeting an appropriate religious text at the appropriate time, at the appropriate time, may prompt one to convert.

Some of our subjects among those who converted to Christianity after getting acquainted with Christianity converted to marry a Christian, while others said that they changed their religion after marrying a Christian. Marriage has an importance and effect on conversion. Those of different religions want their own religious identity to be the same as that of their spouse after marriage. Some converts to get married; some convert after marriage. But does the woman convert to her husband's religion? Or does the husband adopt his wife's religion? Salisbury discusses this issue in his own research. Considering the effects of three factors such as religious identification, gender roles and social status on conversion in marriage, Salisbury concluded that women are more likely to engage in men's religion as they play less roles in society than men [7, 8 p.].

Conclusion

Out of the 25 subjects in our study, 15 were women and 10 were men. In the research, it was revealed that 60–70 % of those who went to church were women. 76 % of Kazakhs who are Christians are in the first adult (22–40) age range. According to the observations we made in the churches, it was concluded that there were more young people between the ages of 22–35. Missionaries are not for the elderly either; Focusing on younger segments is effective in these results. As a result, early adulthood is a period when problems such as having a profession, finding a job, marriage, divorce, being widowed, and losing parents are intense. In the research, it was found that Christianization was a common phenomenon in early adulthood, in general.

The effect of the missionaries sent by Western countries to help the poor in Africa on conversion is a fact known in the relevant literature. Christianization activities of the missionaries who came for aid after the earthquake in Turkey in 1999 are known. The Central Asian countries, which gained independence after the fall of the Soviets after 1990, experienced enormous social and economic crises. However, after independence, atheism in the Soviet era started to lose its effect gradually; people are acquainted with individual religious freedoms. With the expansion of this freedom area, Christian missionaries started to operate in Central Asian countries. Some missionaries have tried to make use of religious freedoms and some of the economic and social crises in the country in their favor. Thus, conversion takes place not only by individual accidents and spontaneous

social relations, but also by institutional and organizational support, as required by the «mission» theology and tradition in Christianity.

As a result of the research, it was concluded that there was a significant lack of religious knowledge. 92 % of our subjects emphasized that they did not receive information about religious issues from their families in their childhood. It has been revealed that those who converted to religion in Kazakhstan society did not have a serious level of religious knowledge.

In the last two centuries Kazakhstan lands have been subjected to Christian missionaries both directly and indirectly. He faced with the Russian Orthodox Missionary that took place during the period of Tsarist Russia. By bringing Russian peasants to the Kazakh lands, Russian Orthodoxy found the opportunity to spread. Later, due to the exile of Germans and Koreans to Kazakhstan lands, other Christian sects started to come. After 1991, the American and European Missionary (Catholic, Protestant, Evangelist, Baptist, Adventist etc.) started to develop. Today, especially Protestant movements show more intense missionary activities than others. 72 % of the subjects (18 people) who participated in our study became Christians through people belonging to the Christian religion. In the research, it was revealed that Christianization was mostly carried out by Christians.

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ҚАЗАҚСТАНДАҒЫ ДІНИ КОНВЕРСИЯНЫ ӘЛЕУМЕТТАНУЛЫҚ ТҮРҒЫДАН ЗЕРТТЕУ

Қазақ қоғамы орыс патшалығы кезінде орыстандыру және шоқындыру саясатын, Кеңес үкіметі кезінде дінсіздендіру саясатын бастан өткерсе, тәуелсіздіктен кейін діни жандану сияқты діни әлеуметтік өзгерістерді бастан өткеріп келеді. Ислам дінінің жандануымен қоса христиан ағымдарының да миссионерлік жұмыстары қоғамда белең ала бастады. Әрине қоғамдағы бұндай діни әлеуметтік өзгерістер адамдардың діни конверсия (conversion) жасауына жол ашты. Яғни дінін ауыстырған адамдар қазақ қоғамында көріне бастады. Бұл мақала тәуелсіздіктен кейінгі қазақ қоғамында пайда болған христиан қазақтарды, яғни діни конверсия жасаған тұлғаларға әлеуметтік зерттеу жүргізіп, дін әлеуметтануы тұрғысынан анализ жасайды.

Бұл зерттеуде сапалық әдіс, бақылау, сұхбат, анализ сияқты әлеуметтік зерттеу әдістері қолданылған. Зерттеуге Қазақстан азаматтығы бар дінін ауыстырған 25 респондентіміз қатысты. Мақалада діни конверсия үрдісі және діни конверсия жасауға себеп болған негізгі факторлар қарастырылған.

Кілтті сөздер: Қазақ қоғамы, Діни конверсия, Христиандандыру миссионерлік, дін әлеуметтануы, әлеуметтік өзгеріс.

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СОЦИОЛОГИЧЕСКОЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ РЕЛИГИОЗНОЙ КОНВЕРСИИ В КАЗАХСТАНЕ

Казахское общество пережило политику русификации и христианизации в период Российской оккупации, атеизм в период Советского союза, а также религиозное возрождение после независимости. После независимости миссионерская деятельность христианской религии увеличилась наряду с исламом. В результате миссионерской деятельности, в обществе начали появляться казахи поменявшие религию. Цель данного исследования с точки зрения социологии – Казахи поменявшие религию в результате миссионерской деятельности, которая появилась после независимости страны.

В исследовании был использован качественный метод социологии, чтобы исследовать текущие и сложные события религиозных изменений. Имеются три дополнительных метода, которые мы использовали в качественном методе: интервью, экспертиза документов и наблюдение. В нашем исследовании было проинтервьюировано 25 человек. Исследовались процесс религиозной конверсии и причины религиозной конверсии.

Ключевые слова: казахское общество, конверсия, христианизация, миссионерство, социология религии, социальное изменение.

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