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## INTEGRATING 'SECULARISM AND FUNDAMENTALS OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES' INTO THE MANDATORY CURRICULUM OF SECONDARY EDUCATION IN ALMATY, KAZAKHSTAN: A CASE STUDY

This article addresses pertinent issues related to the study of religion, the training of specialists, and the development of educational materials. The primary focus of the research lies in evaluating the implementation and impact of the subject "Secularity and Fundamentals of Religious Studies" within the educational system of Kazakhstan, with a specific emphasis on its execution in Almaty, a pivotal cultural and commercial hub in the country. The purpose of the study is to comprehensively assess the implementation and impact of this subject in the education system, as well as identify possible improvements. The authors emphasize the evaluation of the subject's perception, analysis of educational materials, and the collection of proposals for its optimization. Tasks encompass understanding the objectives of the subject, analyzing current educational materials, investigating students' opinions, determining teachers' needs, and gathering suggestions for refining the educational course. The scholarly and practical significance of the research lies in understanding the impact of the educational subject "Secularity and Fundamentals of Religious Studies" on the formation of religious tolerance, prevention of the spread of destructive ideologies, and the enhancement of religious literacy. The methodology involves surveys and discussions with 63 secondary school teachers in Almaty. In conclusion, it can be noted that the introduction of the subject "Secularity and the Fundamentals of Religious Studies" into the educational process helps to increase religious literacy, develop religious tolerance and prevent radical ideology. The practical significance of the research results offers valuable recommendations for improving the educational course and underscores the issue of a shortage of experts in the field of religious education.

**Key words:** religious studies, religious education, secularism, Kazakhstan, tolerance.

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**«Зайырлылық және дінтану негіздері» курсы орта білім берудің міндетті бағдарламасына интеграциялау: Қазақстан, Алматы қ. кейсі**

Бұл мақалада дінтану, мамандар даярлау және оқу материалдарын әзірлеуге қатысты өзекті мәселелер қарастырылған. Зерттеу жұмысының негізгі бағыты «Зайырлылық және дінтану негіздері» пәнінің Қазақстанның білім беру жүйесіне енгізілуі мен нәтижелерін бағалау, оның еліміздегі маңызды мәдени және сауда орталығы Алматыда іске асуына ерекше назар аудару. Зерттеудің мақсаты – пәннің оқыту жүйесіне кіргізілуін жан-жақты бағалау және оның жетілдіру жолдарын анықтау. Авторлар пәнді оқушылардың қабылдауына, оқу материалдарын талдауға және оны оңтайландыру бойынша ұсыныстар жинауға назар аударады. Зерттеу міндеттеріне пәннің мақсаттарын түсінуді анықтау, ағымдағы оқу материалдарын талдау, студенттердің пікірлерін зерттеу, мұғалімнің қажеттіліктерін анықтау және оқу бағдарламасын жетілдіру бойынша ұсыныстар жинау кіреді. Зерттеудің ғылыми-тәжірибелік маңыздылығы «Зайырлылық және дінтану негіздері» оқу пәнінің діни толеранттылықты қалыптастыруға, деструктивті идеологияның таралуына жол бермеуге және діни сауаттылықты арттыруға әсерін түсінуде жатыр. Мақалада Алматы қаласының жалпы білім беретін мектептерінің 63 мұғалімімен жүргізілген сауалнамалар мен пікірталастарға негізделген әлеуметтанулық әдістемелердің қорытындылары қолданылды. Қорытындылай келе «Зайырлылық және дінтану негіздері» пәнінің білім беру жүйесінде оқытылуы жалпы діни сауаттылықтың жоғарылауына, діни толеранттылықты дамытуға, радикалды идеологиялардың алдын алуға ықпал ететіндігі анықталды. Зерттеу нәтижелерінің практикалық салдары оқу бағдарламасын жетілдіру бойынша құнды ұсыныстар береді және дінді оқыту саласындағы мамандардың жетіспеушілігі мәселесін атап көрсетеді.

**Түйін сөздер:** дінтану, діни білім, зайырлылық, Қазақстан, төзімділік.

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### **Интеграция курса «Светскость и основы религиоведения» в обязательную программу среднего образования: кейс г. Алматы, Казахстан**

В данной статье рассматриваются актуальные вопросы, связанные с религиоведческим образованием, подготовкой специалистов и разработкой учебных пособий по данному направлению. Основное внимание исследования уделяется оценке внедрения и воздействия предмета "Светскость и основы религиоведения" в образовательную систему Казахстана, с фокусом на его реализацию в городе Алматы – ключевом культурном и коммерческом центре страны. Целью исследования является комплексная оценка внедрения и воздействия данного предмета в систему образования, а также выявление возможных улучшений. Авторы акцентируют внимание на оценке восприятия предмета, анализе учебных материалов и сборе предложений по его оптимизации. Задачи включают в себя выявление понимания целей предмета, анализ актуальных учебных материалов, исследование мнений учеников, определение потребностей преподавателей, а также сбор предложений по совершенствованию учебного курса. Научная и практическая значимость исследования заключается в понимании воздействия учебного предмета "Светскость и основы религиоведения" на формирование религиозной толерантности, предотвращение распространения деструктивной идеологии и повышение религиозной грамотности. В данной статье были использованы социологические методы, такие как опрос и обмен мнениями с 63 преподавателями средних школ Алматы. В заключении можно отметить что внедрение предмета "Светскость и основы религиоведения" в образовательный процесс, способствует повышению религиозной грамотности, развитию религиозной толерантности и профилактике радикальной идеологии. Практическое значение результатов исследования предоставляет ценные рекомендации для улучшения учебного курса и актуализирует проблему нехватки экспертов в области преподавания религии.

**Ключевые слова:** религиоведение, религиозное образование, светскость, Казахстан, толерантность.

#### **Introduction**

Following Kazakhstan's declaration of independence in 1991, the nation grappled with a diverse demographic landscape comprising over 130 distinct ethnic groups and 42 religious affiliations (Laruelle, 2016). In response to this intricate social tapestry, Busi and Accademico (2014) observed that the Kazakh government embarked on a series of initiatives to mitigate the potential for ethnic and religious conflicts while fostering tolerance and mutual understanding within the country. One of these pivotal measures was the introduction of Religious Studies courses at the secondary school level. Nevertheless, challenges persist, particularly in ensuring the quality of educational services. Despite an annual grant increase for the Religious Studies major, the nation still needs more qualified educators.

Consequently, Religious Studies and Religious Education confront a formidable predicament in modern times. The task of incorporating religion into state policy demands engagement not only from government officials but also from informed religious leaders, civil society members, youth organizations, educators, journalists, and various stakeholders (Zengin, 2017; Ohlsson, 2014; Kartabayeva et.al 2015; Cornell, 2017; Bektenova et.al

2017; Yerekeshova, 2020). To address these issues comprehensively, Kazakhstan adopted the Comprehensive Plan for implementing State Policy in the Religious Sphere for 2021-2023 (Postanovleniye, 2020), structured around three primary priorities. The first focuses on enhancing legislation and regulating state interactions with religious associations, the second emphasises the reinforcement of secular principles in the nation's development, and the third underscores the establishment of a robust system to counteract religious extremism and the activities of destructive religious movements. In the ongoing battle against terrorism and religious extremism, a fundamental role is played by nurturing citizens' resilience to pernicious religious ideologies.

The objective of this study is to assess whether the instruction of the subject "Secularism and the Fundamentals of Religious Studies" in Almaty aligns with the overarching goal of delivering high-quality primary religious education within the secondary school system. The dynamic landscape of Kazakhstan's multicultural and multifaith society underscores the pressing need for effective religious education, rooted in principles of secularism and tolerance, to promote social cohesion and prevent potential conflicts (Smagulov, 2018; Bizhanov, 2019; Bishmanov and Orynbekov, 2021; Akbergen,

2016; Knysh 2019). This study seeks to examine the outcomes and effectiveness of this curriculum in cultivating religious literacy, patience, and mutual understanding among students, ultimately contributing to the broader mission of securing peace and harmony in a diverse and pluralistic society (Baitenova, 2021; Bishmanov, 2023; Tutinova, 2019; Borbassova, 2018; Altaikyzy, 2022). By evaluating the alignment of educational outcomes with policy objectives, this research aims to offer insights that can inform improvements in religious education and promote the harmonious coexistence of diverse religious and cultural communities in Kazakhstan.

### **Justification of the choice of topic, goals and objectives**

The introduction of the course “Secularism and Fundamentals of Religious Studies” in secondary education stands as a critical contemporary issue, notably influenced by the evolving landscape in Kazakhstan during the late twentieth century that saw a resurgence of religious practices. This resurgence has significantly impacted various facets of public life, prominently permeating into the realm of secular education, thereby magnifying the complex intersection of 'education and religion.' This confluence has sparked multifaceted debates within society, spanning concerns such as the emulation of religious practices among young individuals and the infiltration of foreign, potentially destabilizing ideologies into our cultural fabric. Addressing these debates is pivotal for education, as it serves as the cornerstone for nurturing individuals steeped in patriotism and cultural reverence, shaping the youth of a new Kazakhstan. Within the educational domain, fostering the appropriate perspectives and motivations towards religion in the younger generation hinges upon the incorporation of religious studies within both secondary and higher education systems. Therefore, assessing and monitoring the quality and efficacy of religious programs and curricula play a pivotal role in molding citizens of a secular state.

The integration of this course into the mandatory secondary education curriculum presents students with diverse opportunities:

- It enables a comprehensive grasp of fundamental concepts and issues concerning religion, fostering a deeper understanding.
- Encourages the development of critical thinking skills, empowering students to question, analyze, and engage in informed discussions on intricate religious topics. Exposure to various reli-

gions and empirical data supports this process.

- Facilitates the cultivation of civic responsibility by promoting an understanding of secularism, which in turn encourages active and conscientious student involvement in shaping a democratic society.

Presently, the study of religious education not only provides insight into contemporary Kazakhstan but also delineates the significance and status of religious education within our multiethnic, multiconfessional society. It serves as a means to anticipate potential future shifts not only within the educational sphere but also across social, political, historical, and other dimensions.

### **Literature review**

History of teaching “Religious Studies” as a subject in Kazakhstan

A significant contemporary challenge facing Kazakhstan society revolves around the establishment of a culture of religious tolerance. Balpanov, Ismagambetova, and Karabaeva (2017) have cautioned that a failure to take adequate precautions could result in social consequences that hinder urbanization and jeopardize societal stability. In 2004, in alignment with the Presidential Decree issued on February 10, 2000, titled “On measures to prevent and suppress manifestations of terrorism and extremism,” the elective subject “Fundamentals of Religious Studies” was introduced into the curriculum for ninth-grade students in secondary schools (Ukaz Prezidenta Respubliki Kazahstan, 2000). In 2009-2010, this course became a compulsory elective, spanning thirty-four hours throughout the academic year. It is imperative to note that the elective course “Fundamentals of Religious Studies” is a secular discipline. The primary aim of this subject is to impart knowledge concerning the general principles governing the formation and evolution of cultural and religious processes. It seeks to elucidate the development of global and national religions within the context of their diversity and to nurture students' spiritual and moral attributes. The textbook “Fundamentals of Religious Studies” has been authored by renowned religious scholars, including G. Yessim, A. Abuov, and E. Smagulov (2010). The Ministry of Education and Science has articulated its vision for this elective subject to serve as a means of enriching the knowledge of the younger generation and preparing them to thrive in a multicultural environment by equipping them with essential insights into the role of religion within society.

Regrettably, the intended objectives of the elective course, "Fundamentals of Religious Studies," have not been fully realized due to recurring issues, primarily the scarcity of qualified instructors and suitable textbooks. Consequently, to address the dearth of proficient educators, the responsibility for teaching the "Fundamentals of Religious Studies" course was entrusted to history teachers.

However, it's essential to recognize that each of these subjects, Religious Studies and History, is grounded in distinct domains of knowledge. Religious Studies, for instance, centers on the study of religion itself, a profoundly intricate phenomenon. Given that religion permeates various facets of society and profoundly influences the historical development of humanity, knowledgeable historians are well positioned to contribute to this educational endeavor. The inherent complexity and intricacies of the subject are undeniable. Students are required to grapple with the complexities of understanding diverse world religions and their roles in a secular world, aided by elements of Philosophy, Theology, and History. These demands often create a clash of perspectives, with some concepts proving irreconcilable. At times, facts may appear ambiguous, compelling the subject to navigate a middle ground or seek a compromise while upholding objectivity and impartiality.

Shvechikov (2009) asserted that crafting a curriculum for this subject is a challenging task, often rendering amendments and updates impractical. Historians, who view history as a discipline focusing on the societal laws of development, contend that it primarily adheres to the materialistic nature of the world. This perspective places precedence on economic and societal factors over individual spiritual aspects. Consequently, Shvechikov (2009) posited that liberal historians hold views that diverge significantly from those of faith-based religious scholars.

In contrast, Kosichenko A.G. (2022) emphasized that religious studies are far from being a lightweight subject. Mere descriptions fall short, as this field demands comprehensive exploration and sound logical explanations. Profound research, rather than mere event descriptions and interpretations, is essential, necessitating the expertise of highly qualified religious scholars. The allocated time of 34 hours proves insufficient for the task.

Since 2016, the subject "Fundamentals of Religious Studies" has been succeeded by the course "Secularism and Fundamentals of Religious Studies." This curriculum is anticipated to play a pivotal role in preventing religious extremism driven

by ideological motivations and reinforcing the principles of secularism. The program spans 34 hours of lectures over the academic term, covering topics such as "Secularism and the Secular State," "Global and Traditional Religions," "Religions in Kazakhstan," "Islamic Culture in Kazakhstan," "Emerging Religious Trends," "Kazakhstan as a Hub of Interreligious Harmony," and "Extremism and Terrorism."

### **Designing a Standardized Curriculum for the 'Secularism and Fundamentals of Religious Studies' Course at the Ninth-Grade Level in Basic Secondary Education**

This section explores the development and significance of a standardized curriculum for the 'Secularism and Fundamentals of Religious Studies' course at the ninth-grade level in basic secondary education in Kazakhstan. The curriculum alignment with state educational standards, its role in fostering sustainable development and cultural values, its integration with national policies, and its historical and philosophical foundations are discussed. The section also delves into the objectives of teaching this subject, its learning objectives, and its interdisciplinary approach. Additionally, it presents the workload for grade 9 students and the curriculum's potential to contribute to a holistic education system.

The development and implementation of a standardized curriculum are essential for maintaining the quality and consistency of education in any country. In Kazakhstan, the 'Secularism and Fundamentals of Religious Studies' curriculum for ninth-grade students in basic secondary education was meticulously crafted to align with state educational standards (Mustafayeva, 2023). The curriculum was developed in strict accordance with the state compulsory standards of secondary education, encompassing primary, basic secondary, and general secondary education levels. It received government approval from the Republic of Kazakhstan on August 23, 2012 (MES RK, 2013). This alignment reflects the commitment to maintaining high educational standards and ensuring that students receive a comprehensive and standardized education.

The 'Secularism and Fundamentals of Religious Studies' course is not just another addition to the curriculum; it holds a pivotal role in fostering sustainable development and shaping the historical, cultural, and spiritual values of modern society. As a structural component of socio-humanitarian and social science knowledge, it contributes to students' understanding of the diverse aspects of our contemporary world.

Kazakhstan's contemporary policy is committed to fostering interethnic and interfaith respect and tolerance among its diverse population (Bozymbekova, 2018). This curriculum plays a significant role in achieving this policy objective by promoting an integral system of spiritual and moral values. It provides the foundation for a harmonious and respectful coexistence of various ethnic and cultural groups within the country.

The curriculum is deeply rooted in an understanding of the historical relationship between religion and the state, culture, and civilization. Drawing from centuries-old human experience and spirituality, it equips students with valuable knowledge about the complex interplay between these elements. Moreover, it is heavily influenced by the teachings and legacies of renowned Kazakh philosophers, such as Al-Farabi, Khoja Ahmet Yassau, Abai, Ybyray, and Shakarim. These philosophers' historical reasoning and practices have left an indelible mark on the curriculum, emphasizing the significant role of religion in the history of the state and the holistic development of the individual.

The primary purpose of teaching this subject is multi-faceted:

- Instilling the principle of secularism as a core value, highlighting its importance in ensuring the stability of the state.
- Providing comprehensive knowledge about freedom of conscience, the history and status of world and traditional religions, as well as new and potentially harmful religious movements.
- Educating students to reject extremist ideologies, terrorism, and religious radicalism while fostering values of tolerance and a humanistic worldview based on spiritual and moral principles.

The curriculum sets specific learning objectives for students, including:

- Equipping students with systematic knowledge about the meaning of religion, its history, and its role in society.
- Shaping an understanding of secularism as the foundation of statehood and independence, enhancing students' knowledge in this direction.
- Developing the ability to compare the foundations of religious consciousness, belief, knowledge, and education.
- Explaining the significance of worldviews and the cultural and moral aspects of religions.

- Cultivating skills to respect freedom of conscience and maintain a secular attitude toward contemporary religious trends.

- Demonstrating the interethnic and interfaith harmony of Kazakhstan within the context of secularism, and fostering civic maturity and responsibility.

- Explaining the dangers of ideologies associated with religious radicalism and extremism for national security, secular principles, and social stability.

- Developing students' cultural and analytical skills, enabling them to critically analyze and evaluate materials from religious literature, electronic resources, and mass media.

- Emphasizing the importance of legal literacy in public life and instilling a desire to continually improve it, along with a respect for human rights and the freedoms of the citizens of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Kenzhetaev et.al, 2016).

The curriculum promotes an interdisciplinary approach by establishing principles of continuity and communication with subjects such as history, sociology, literature, art, and the course on Abaitanu. This approach ensures that students receive a holistic and well-rounded education, with the various subject areas complementing and reinforcing each other. For grade 9 students, the curriculum prescribes one hour per week, totaling 34 hours per academic year. This allocation is designed to balance the curriculum with other subjects while ensuring that students receive comprehensive instruction.

The 'Secularism and Fundamentals of Religious Studies' curriculum for ninth-grade students in basic secondary education in Kazakhstan is a meticulously designed educational program. It aligns with state standards, serves as a crucial component in shaping cultural and spiritual values, and contributes to Kazakhstan's contemporary policy of fostering interethnic and interfaith respect and tolerance. Its historical and philosophical foundations, purpose, and learning objectives aim to prepare students for the complexities of the modern world while instilling values of tolerance, secularism, and civic responsibility. Through its interdisciplinary approach and balanced workload, it integrates seamlessly with the broader education system, ensuring that students receive a comprehensive and standardized education.

**Table 1.** Calendar and Thematic Plan of the Subject

Number of hours: total 34 hours per week – 1 hour ((Kenzhetayev et.al, 2016)

Lesson No.	Lesson Theme	Hour
1	Introduction: the course subject “Secularism and the Fundaments of Religious Studies”	1
2	Secularism and the secular state: definition, meaning and character	1
3	Secular state and religion	1
4	Principles of secularism in the education system	1
5	The meaning of religion, its definition, social purpose, genesis, classification. Structure and functions of religion.	1
6	Formation and development of the science of religion: religious studies. Basic religious concepts.	1
7	Forms of ancient beliefs and national religions. Religions in Ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome.	1
8	Hinduism. Confucianism. Taoism. Shinto. Judaism.	1
9	The Tanakh and the Talmud. Deity. The role of the deity in the ancient Turkic worldview	1
10	Buddhism: fundamentals of teaching, history, practice (experience) and regions of distribution. The main directions of Buddhism	1
11	Christianity: fundamentals of doctrine, history, practice (experience) and regions of distribution	1
12	Jesus Christ and the Gospel.	1
13	The main directions of Christianity (Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Protestantism).	1
14	Christianity in the modern world.	1
15	Islam: fundamentals of the creed, history, practice (experience) and regions of distribution.	1
16	The Prophet Muhammad. Sacred book is the Quran.	1
17	Trends in Islam. Basic schools of Muslim law (mazhabs)	1
18	The historical conditions of the spread and establishment in Kazakhstan of the Hanafi theological and legal school. Its connection with the national culture.	1
19	Schools of Sufism. Islam, science and culture.	1
20	Spread of Islam in Kazakhstan.	1
21	The role of Islam in the formation and development of the Kazakh statehood.	1
22	Islam in the XX century and in modern Kazakhstan. Dissemination of Hanafi legal norms and practices in Kazakhstan.	1
23	Spread of Christianity in Kazakhstan.	1
24	The Orthodox Church in Kazakhstan. Culture of Christianity in Kazakhstan	1
25	Culture of Islam in Kazakhstan. Islamic architectural and monumental art in Kazakhstan. Monuments of Islamic manuscript culture.	1
26	Philosophical, educational and religious views of al-Farabi, Zhusup Balasaguni, Mahmud Kashgari, Ahmed Ieguniki, Husam al-Din Signaki.	1
27	Theologians of the XIX-XX centuries. Spiritual heritage of Abai and Shakarim	1
28	Doctrine, forms and features of new religious movements. Dilemma of new religious movements and traditional religious systems: cognitive, psychological and everyday contradictions	1
29	The symptoms and effects of activities of destructive movements.	1
30	The symptoms and effects of activities of destructive movements. Prohibited religious associations. Religious extremism and terrorism: definition, signs and consequences. Terrorism is foreign to religion. Danger of religious extremism and terrorism to national security.	1
31	Kazakhstan is a country of interreligious peace and harmony. Religious legislation of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Secularism is the platform of the state system and national security	1
32	The concept of freedom of religious belief	1
33	Platform for interreligious harmony and dialogue in modern Kazakhstan	1
34	Policy of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev on establishment of interreligious dialogue, peace and harmony in Kazakhstan and the world community	1

Scientific research methodology and findings

In this section, we outline the methodology employed in this study and present the key findings. The primary method of data collection centers around a survey aimed at evaluating the extent to which methodological materials align with students' perceptions of the subject's goals and objectives. Additionally, the study seeks to identify areas for potential enhancements in the educational process, explore pertinent subject matter, and gauge students' and their parents' perspectives on the subject. In pursuit of the study's objectives, the following primary tasks were addressed:

- Assessing respondents' understanding of the subject's goals and objectives.
- Identifying the most pertinent subject matter.
- Analyzing the respondents' opinions regarding students' perceptions of the subject.
- Ascertaining teachers' requirements for supplementary materials.
- Evaluating the respondents' suggestions for enhancing the subject's development.

To conduct the sociological research, a formalized questionnaire was administered to teachers. The study focused on educators in Almaty teaching the subject "Secularism and Fundamentals of Religious Studies." The core subject of examination pertained to the respondents' perceptions of this subject. The research encompassed questionnaire-based surveys and group discussions. The sample size comprised

63 participants representing diverse secondary schools in Almaty.

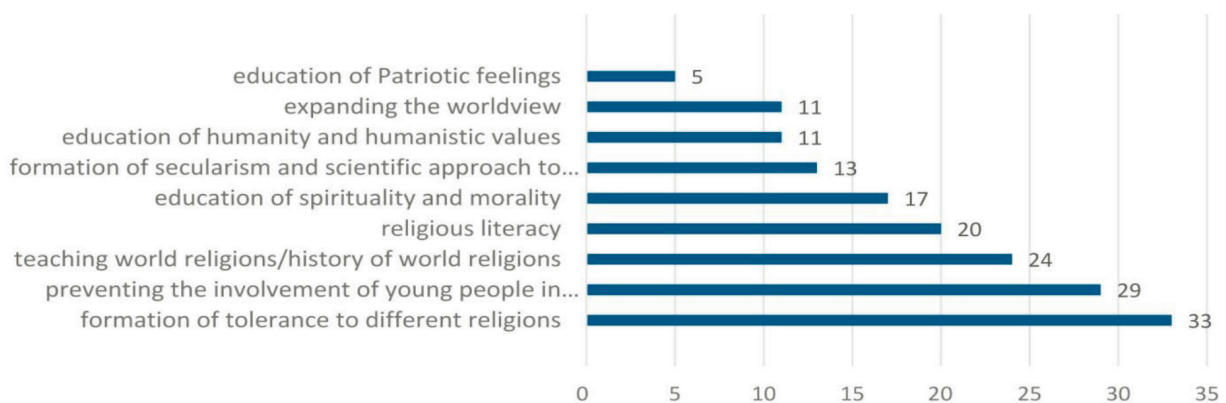
**Results and discussion**

**1. Teachers' Perception of Subject Goals and Objectives in Religious Studies**

Teachers' understanding of the goals and objectives of a subject plays a pivotal role in shaping the direction and outcome of the learning process. In the context of religious studies, this perception is a crucial determinant of the educational journey's success.

A survey was conducted to gain insights into the primary goals and objectives of teaching religious studies. The results reveal that 33% of respondents consider the "formation of religious tolerance" as a fundamental objective. Nearly a third of secondary school teachers (29%) emphasized the importance of "preventing youth involvement in destructive religious associations." "Familiarizing students with world religions and their history" garnered 24% of the votes, while "religious literacy" received 20% support. "Cultivating spirituality and morality" was chosen by 17% of respondents. A smaller percentage (13%) saw the "Formation of secularism and a scientific approach to religion" as relevant. Additionally, 11% of respondents highlighted the goals of "Nurturing humanity and humanistic values" and "Expanding students' worldviews."

Notably, the objective of "Fostering patriotic spirit" lagged significantly behind other goals and objectives, with only 5% support (Figure 1).

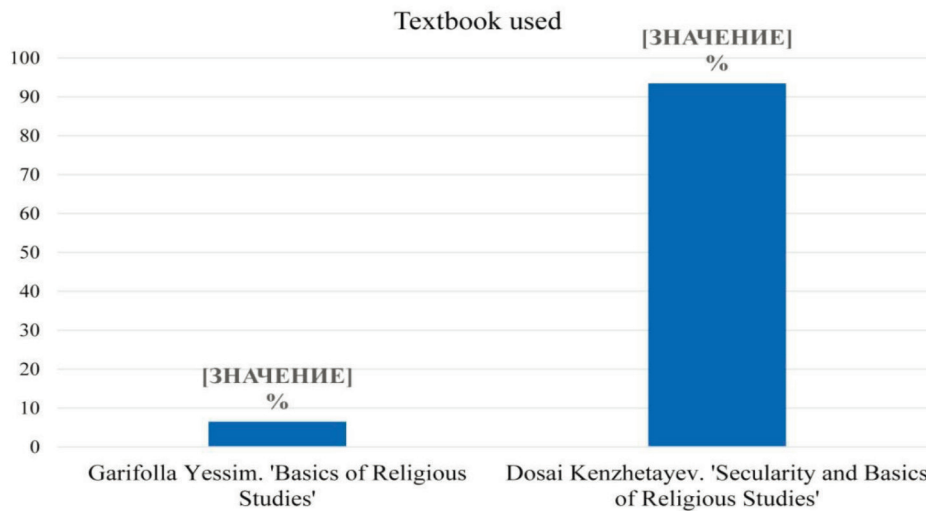


**Fig.1.** Definition of the purpose and task of teaching Religious Studies

## 2. Preferred Teaching Materials in Practice

The study's findings underscore a clear preference among the vast majority of respondents for the textbook “Secularism and Fundamentals of Religious Studies” by Kenzhetaev D., with a substantial 93.5% selecting it as their primary teaching resource. In contrast, a more limited 15% of the teachers opt for supplementary in-

structional material in the form of “Fundamentals of Religious Studies” by Yessim G. A modest 6.5% of teachers incorporate the latter resource into their teaching methods (see Figure 2). These results reflect the overwhelming popularity of the textbook authored by Kenzhetaev D. among educators, underlining its central role in religious studies instruction.

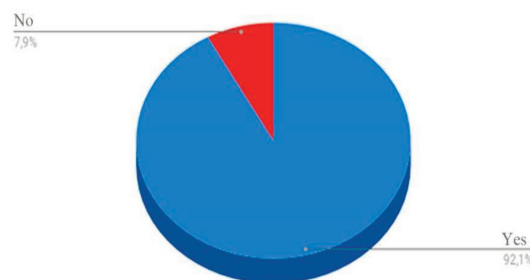


**Fig.2.** Preferences in choosing a textbook as the main methodological material

## 3. Public Discourse on Secularism in Kazakhstan

According to Messina et al. (2017), Kazakhstan has been a backdrop for fervent academic and public discussions surrounding the essence of a secular state. A significant development took place during the 2017/2018 academic year when the subject was officially titled “Secularism and Fundamentals of Religious Studies.” The significance of highlighting secularism in education was

confirmed through a survey, where an overwhelming 92.1% of respondents expressed a strong affirmative stance on the matter (refer to Figure 3). A minor fraction of respondents, comprising 7.9%, offered a contrary perspective. This overwhelming consensus underlines the critical importance of emphasizing secularism in both the state and the education of the youth, fostering a spirit of tolerance.



**Fig.3.** Emphasis on Secularism in Education – Survey Results



#### 4. Challenges in Addressing Student Inquiries

In the survey, respondents were tasked with identifying questions frequently posed by students, which they find challenging to address. The results revealed that a substantial portion of teachers (40%) did not encounter such difficulties, making diligent efforts to respond to students' queries to the best of their knowledge.

Around a third of the teachers (26%) expressed difficulty in addressing questions related to terrorism and destructive trends. For 11% of the respondents, questions pertaining to the intricacies and nuances

of various world religions posed challenges. In addition, 7% of the respondents found it challenging to respond to inquiries about the current religious landscape and emerging trends.

Providing information about myths proved to be a hurdle for 6% of respondents, while 4% encountered difficulties when offering personal value judgments. In relatively rare cases, questions concerning the origins of humanity and the provision of evidence for the existence of God posed challenges in providing explanations to students (refer to Figure 4).

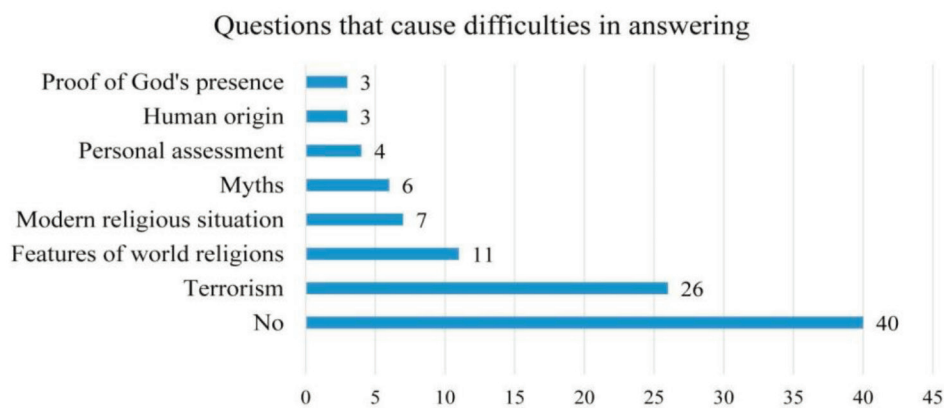


Fig. 4. Questions that caused difficulties in answering during the lesson

#### Recommendations

Public organizations are encouraged to champion the idea of revising the textbook “Secularism and Fundamentals of Religious Studies” and securing its mandatory endorsement by the Coordination Council for the forthcoming targeted program, “Formation of Attitudes of Tolerant Consciousness and Prevention of Extremism in Kazakhstani Society.”

Furthermore, it is imperative to transition discussions regarding teachers' hourly compensation and the maximum educational workload from professional spheres to the public domain. Engaging public organizations and representatives from the academic community in the following dialogues is recommended:

An exploration of the philosophical underpinnings within Kazakhstan's educational system, their prevalence, and the approach to address them.

The establishment of a Council focused on the humanistic aspects of the educational process under the purview of the Ministry of Education, comprising

individuals from academic institutions, teachers, and representatives of public organizations.

An intensified collaborative effort between human rights and religious organizations to address the preamble of the Law governing the activities of religious organizations and religious associations.

By addressing these crucial matters and fostering open dialogue, Kazakhstan can continue to advance its educational and social objectives in a progressive and inclusive manner.

#### Conclusion

The subject's overarching goals encompass the “Formation of religious tolerance,” “Prevention of youth involvement in destructive religious associations,” “Familiarization with world religions and their history,” and the cultivation of “Religious literacy.” The primary textbook, “Secularism and Fundamentals of Religious Studies” authored by Kenzhetayev D., is predominantly used, occasionally complemented by “Fundamentals of Religious Studies” by G. Yessim.

Notably, the subject underscores the significance of secularism, a theme that has received substantial emphasis. Feedback from students, parents, and teachers is overwhelmingly positive, with students demonstrating increased awareness of world religions and an eagerness for additional resources as the course progresses.

Nonetheless, the shortage of subject experts remains a pressing challenge, warranting attention

and solutions in the ongoing development of this critical educational subject.

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