



# Interaction of politics and religion as a factor in shaping the religious culture of Kyrgyzstan's youth

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## Abstract

Democracy and frequent changes of government in Kyrgyzstan contribute to the spread of various religious movements in the country. Social processes, political shifts and the spread of radical religious ideas among young people emphasize the relevance of this study. The purpose of this article is to assess the impact of Kyrgyzstan's religious policy on the religious consciousness of contemporary youth. The study used general scientific methods of analysis and synthesis, generalization, historical and critical, comparative, dialectical, as well as empirical methods of surveys and questionnaires. The study showed that the religious policy of Kyrgyzstan is characterized by democracy and liberalism, based on the secular nature of the state. Kyrgyzstan is a multi-confessional country, with more than 30 religions. The vast majority of Kyrgyzstan's population are Sunni Muslims, and the second most common religious denomination is Orthodox Christianity. Since 1991, Kyrgyzstan has witnessed a process of Islamization, and non-traditional religious movements, both Islamic and other religious doctrines, have also penetrated and gained popularity in the country. The state's liberal policy in the field of religion facilitates the penetration of non-traditional religious organizations from abroad into Kyrgyzstan. Young people are particularly susceptible to new religious movements. This phenomenon can lead to the spread of radical religious ideas among the youth of Kyrgyzstan. In this regard, the state should pay closer attention to the policy in the field of religion. The practical value of the work is determined by the fact that its results can be useful in further research on this issue.

**Keywords:** Religious Renaissance, Religious Organisations, Islamic Education, Hanafi School of Thought, Non-Traditional Religious Movements.

## Introduction



Kyrgyzstan is a young modern state in Central Asia that gained independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Unlike other neighbouring post-Soviet states, Kyrgyzstan is characterised by a democratic political regime marked by frequent changes in power. The young Kyrgyz democracy faces certain challenges in its development. Three times in the history of independent Kyrgyzstan, power has changed through revolutionary popular uprisings. Such political conditions contribute to the relatively weak regulation of religious activities in Kyrgyzstan, creating a favourable environment for the free operation and development of various religious organisations. The rejection of the dominant atheistic ideology in the Soviet Union gave rise to a “religious renaissance” in post-Soviet states (Makhmudova et al., 2023).

In Kyrgyzstan, during the 1990s and 2000s, there was a process of intensive Islamisation. Alongside the traditional Islamic movements in Kyrgyzstan, new trends began to infiltrate, particularly attracting the younger generation. The turn of the 20th century into the 21st century witnessed the rapid spread of radical movements and the emergence of new religious organisations in the Islamic world, many of which were recognised as extremists in several countries (Dzhansarayeva et al., 2014). Due to political circumstances and democratic development in Kyrgyzstan, some similar organisations are not prohibited and can operate freely. Many young people become followers of non-traditional movements, which attract youth with their radicalism and innovative approach (Tsafirir, 2004). These circumstances necessitate a detailed analysis of how Kyrgyzstan’s state policy in the field of religion influences the formation of the religious culture of contemporary Kyrgyz youth, which determines the relevance of this study.

The sovereign policy of Kyrgyzstan in the field of religion and the formation of religious self-consciousness among Kyrgyz youth in the post-independence era has been the subject of study by various researchers. Ch. Chotaeva (2005) discusses the ethno-religious situation in contemporary Kyrgyzstan, emphasising the country’s multi-religious nature and the state’s liberal religious policy, which the author considers advantageous. The author noted that during the years of independence, amid the “religious renaissance,” a significant portion of Kyrgyzstan’s youth received religious education abroad, particularly in Egypt, Turkey, and Pakistan. According to the researcher, this phenomenon enhances the influence of these countries on the religious culture of Kyrgyz youth.

E. Nasritdinov and N. Esenamanova (2014) addressed religious security in Kyrgyzstan. The authors draw attention to the issue of the lack of direct interaction between the state and religious communities, which could be dangerous in the future due to the infiltration of radical religious ideas among the youth. However, overall, the researchers positively evaluate Kyrgyzstan’s policy in the field of religion, noting the absence of acute interfaith confrontation. A. Aidaraliev (2016) explores the religious situation in Central Asian countries. The researcher discusses the vibrant “religious renaissance” that swept the region in the post-Soviet era and the sharp increase in the number of both mosques and Christian churches. The author positively assesses the dynamics of the growth of religious organisations in Central Asian countries during the post-Soviet period.

D.A. Osmonova (2020) examined the coexistence of Islamic canons and pre-Islamic traditions in the religious culture of the Kyrgyz people. The researcher emphasises that Islam found a response among the Kyrgyz-Tengrians. According to her, historically, the Kyrgyz people have peacefully coexisted with Islamic religion and pre-Islamic religious remnants. Therefore, foreign preachers, whose activities are mainly directed towards young people, often do not consider this specificity, which becomes a cause of religious conflicts. The history of religion and education in Central Asian countries is the subject of a study by F. Yuldoshova and F. Khudoyorova (2021). The researchers talk about the deep roots of Islamic education in the region and the high culture of the local people in the past, which is now experiencing a revival. The influence of Islam on the transformation of public consciousness is the focus of the collective paper by J. Ramatov et al. (2022). The authors discuss the significant influence of religion on the formation of the worldview of contemporary youth in Islamic countries.



The purpose of this paper is to analyse the interaction between politics and religion on the religious consciousness of the youth in Kyrgyzstan. The tasks set include analysing the evolution of the state policy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the field of religion and determining the popularity of religious trends among the youth in Kyrgyzstan, along with assessing the potential relationship with the state's policy in this area.

## Materials and Methods

Empirical methods of survey and questionnaire, historical-critical, comparative, and dialectical approaches, as well as general scientific methods of analysis and synthesis, were employed in the study. Obtaining the required data and determining the causes and effects of the observed phenomena were made possible by the analysis method. By employing this approach, it was possible to discern the quantitative attributes of the fluctuations in the level of religiosity among the populace of Kyrgyzstan. A computation of the phenomenon was performed utilizing the statistical data acquired via the analysis method. The utilization of this approach facilitated the examination of particular data and attributes pertaining to the aspects of the religious policy implemented by the Kyrgyz Republic. This approach was utilized to ascertain the extent to which the religious life of the populace of Kyrgyzstan was impacted by the actual state actions of the Kyrgyz Republic.

Through the use of the synthesis method, a comprehensive picture of the religiosity of modern Kyrgyz youth and their receptivity to new religious trends could be constructed. Generalization facilitated the acquisition of precise statistical data pertaining to the emergence and progression of religious organizations, as well as diverse attributes of the populace of Kyrgyzstan's religiosity. As one of the foundational approaches to historical inquiry, the historical-critical method entails not merely a literal interpretation of data from a historical source, but rather a critical evaluation of that data in light of the source's creation era and other pertinent characteristics. By employing the historical-critical approach, sources could be scrutinized by considering the period and transformations within the political milieu of Kyrgyzstan. This methodology facilitated an awareness of the extent to which contemporary Kyrgyz youth genuinely adhere to religious beliefs, as well as the ways in which religious organization activities and state policy exert an influence on this phenomenon. By employing the comparative method, information was gathered concerning the ways in which Kyrgyzstan's religious policy differs from that of other post-Soviet Central Asian states and its impact on the religiosity of the populace, particularly the youth. By employing the comparative method, an analysis was conducted to examine the temporal evolution of religiosity among the populace of Kyrgyzstan from the time of the Declaration of Independence until the present. By analysing a range of statistical data, it was possible to identify the determinants of the increase or decrease in religiosity among the population of Kyrgyzstan, as well as the ways in which this may have been impacted by political shifts and the unique characteristics of state policy regarding religion.

Examining the religious culture of the youth of Kyrgyzstan within the framework of worldwide developments in the religious domain during the last three decades was made possible through the dialectical method. Furthermore, this approach facilitated the identification of shared characteristics among the "religious renaissance" in Kyrgyzstan and analogous occurrences in other post-Soviet nations. The differentiation of acquired data allowed for the identification of crucial aspects pertaining to the "religious renaissance" in Kyrgyzstan and the Islamization of young people at the onset of the 19th and 20th centuries. Understanding the phenomena's causes and effects was made possible through the application of this method, not only in Kyrgyzstan but also in other Islamic countries. For the purpose of gathering precise data regarding the religiosity of modern-day youth in Kyrgyzstan, empirical methods including surveys and questionnaires were employed. Students in the city of Bishkek participated in the survey. In-depth interviews were conducted with 1500 individuals aged 18 to 24. Questionnaires the following were distributed to the students:

1. Which religion do you adhere to?
2. Have you read the Quran or the Bible?
3. How regularly do you visit a mosque or a church?
4. Do you observe fasting?

## 5. How religious do you consider yourself to be?

The survey and questionnaire methods helped realise the level of religiosity among Kyrgyzstan's youth, determine young people's familiarity with sacred religious texts, and assess the extent to which they adhere to religious practices.

### Results

Kyrgyzstan is a multi-confessional state, with its population adhering to more than 30 religions. However, despite this significant multi-confessionalism, Sunni Islam dominates in Kyrgyzstan (Figure 1).

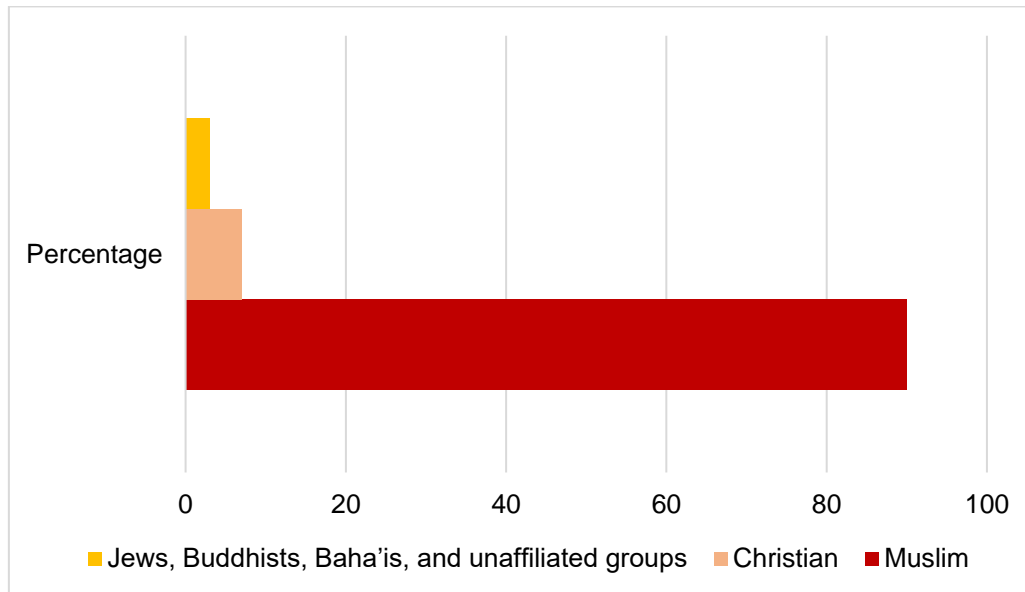


Figure 1. Percentage of religions in the Kyrgyz Republic.

Source: compiled by the authors based on Kyrgyz Republic 2020 International Religious Freedom Report (2021)

This dynamic is not only due to the active missionary activities of Muslim missionaries but also to demographic factors. Muslims primarily consist of ethnic Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, and representatives of other Asian nationalities, whose numbers have been steadily increasing since Kyrgyzstan's independence in 1991. Meanwhile, Orthodox Christians are predominantly ethnic Russians and representatives of other Slavic nationalities, whose emigration from Kyrgyzstan has not ceased since 1991 (Chotaeva, 2005).

Indeed, Sunni Islam of the Hanafi school of jurisprudence and Orthodox Christianity are the traditional faiths in Kyrgyzstan. The Hanafi School of Jurisprudence is a prominent branch of Sunni Islam, known for its emphasis on independent reasoning, flexibility, and the use of personal opinion in legal rulings. It is the oldest of the four major Sunni Islamic schools of jurisprudence, followed by approximately 30% of Sunni Muslims worldwide (Karimullah & Sygitanata, 2023). In turn, Orthodox Christianity is a branch of Christianity that originated in the Eastern Roman Empire and is characterized by its adherence to traditional Christian beliefs and practices (Ćeranić et al., 2023). The term "Orthodox" comes from the Greek word "orthodoxos," meaning "right belief" or "right worship" (Jeong et al., 2023).

Other religious movements, followed by about 2% of the population, are considered non-traditional (Osmonova, 2019). However, due to the active missionary work of their missionaries and the democratic structure of Kyrgyzstan in comparison to other Central Asian states, the number of adherents to these so-called non-traditional faiths is increasing, mainly among the youth (Aidaraliev,



2016). Over the years of independence, the Baha'i community has gained significant popularity among these "non-traditional" religions in Kyrgyzstan. The Bahá'í Faith is a religion that emphasizes the essential worth of all religions and the unity of all people. The Bahá'í community believes in the oneness of humanity, the common foundation of all religions, and the need to find a unifying vision for the future of society and the nature and purpose of life (Nurish, 2021). The Bahá'í community in Kyrgyzstan has a presence in several localities, with the largest community located in Bishkek. Despite facing challenges related to registration and legal status, the Bahá'í Faith is recognized as a legal religion in the country and has been registered by the Justice Ministry (Law of the Kyrgyz..., 2008).

In addition, Islamic religious communities not belonging to the Hanafi school of thought have recently emerged in Kyrgyzstan. These include religious organisations such as "Tablighi Jamaat," "Ahmadiyya," and "Salafism" (Osmonova, 2019). Salafism is a fundamentalist Sunni Islamic movement that seeks to return to the "pious ancestors" of the religion, the salaf al-salih (righteous predecessors). In Kyrgyzstan, Salafism has been banned due to concerns about religious extremism and its potential to undermine the state's security (Nasritdinov & Myrzabaev, 2022). The Kyrgyz government has taken measures to isolate and control religious groups, preferring a version of Islam that they refer to as "traditional Islam" or Hanafism. This policy is a response to the perceived threat of religious radicalism and the influence of external forces, particularly from the Middle East.

Concerning Christian denominations, there are small communities of Roman Catholics, as well as various Protestant denominations such as Lutherans, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, Pentecostals, and Jehovah's Witnesses in Kyrgyzstan (Concept state policy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the religious sphere, 2006). It is worth noting that members of Protestant communities are often national minorities. Thus, ethnic Germans are predominantly Lutherans (Chotaeva, 2005). As of now, the State Commission for Religious Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic has officially registered 3385 religious organisations. Of these, 2968 are Islamic, 402 are Christian, and 12 are Baha'i communities (Religious organisations, 2023).

The history of religion in Kyrgyzstan has undergone certain transformations over the past centuries. Although the majority of Kyrgyz people adhere to Islam, it is important to note that the intensive Islamisation of Kyrgyzstan began only in the era of independence. The Kyrgyz people were introduced to Islam as early as the 8th century, but they started adopting Islam intensively only in the 17th to 19th centuries. Islam spread to Kyrgyzstan from the Fergana Valley. During this time, the so-called "wandering mullahs," preachers from neighbouring Muslim countries, played a significant role in spreading Islam among the Kyrgyz people (Osmonova, 2020). The fact that the Kyrgyz people embraced Islam later than other neighbouring peoples has led to them being less religious than their neighbours.

The customs and religious traditions of the Kyrgyz people retained practices of Tengrism, which the Kyrgyz people followed before accepting Islam. Tengrism, originating in the Eurasian steppes, is a religion based on shamanism and animism, involving the sky god Tengri and a set of moral codes (Isaacs, 2021). In Kyrgyzstan, Tengrism has been suggested as a Pan-Turkic national ideology, and it is estimated to have over 50,000 followers in the country. Tengrism is also practiced in other countries such as Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and Turkey. Unlike representatives of neighbouring Muslim nations, the Kyrgyz people were less strict in adhering to Islamic religious practices. This became the reason why Muslim travellers and missionaries often referred to the Kyrgyz as "kafirs" – unbelievers. In addition, the religious practices of the Kyrgyz were influenced by the "manaps" – heads of clans. Often, when a manap decided to embrace Islam, all members of the clan would become Muslims. However, the clan leader himself determined which Islamic practices should be followed and which should not (Yuldoshova & Khudoyorova, 2021).

During the Soviet era, a policy of combating religion was implemented, and atheistic ideology officially prevailed. Such a policy did not contribute to the strengthening of religiosity among the Kyrgyz people. However, religion became one of the markers of ethnic identity during this time. The Kyrgyz people began to identify themselves as Muslims, in contrast to the Russian Orthodox



Christians (Engvall, 2020; Laurelle, 2021). With the dissolution of the USSR and the abandonment of the policy of state atheism in Kyrgyzstan, as in other post-Soviet states, a “religious renaissance” began. The democratisation of society, the state’s support for freedom of religion, and the liberalisation of legislation regarding religions led to an increase in both the overall number of believers and various religious organisations in Kyrgyzstan in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Tabeikyna et al., 2021). The “religious renaissance” in Kyrgyzstan initially involved Islam, Christianity, and non-traditional religious movements for Kyrgyzstan. Traditionally, Southern Kyrgyzstan is a more religious region, while in the north of Kyrgyzstan and the capital city of Bishkek, a secular lifestyle predominates. This regional feature was inherent in Kyrgyzstan in the Soviet era. This situation is caused by the ethnic makeup of Kyrgyzstan. Thus, the north of the country and the capital are more multinational than the south. Moreover, a significant Uzbek diaspora lives in southern Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbeks were initially more religious than Kyrgyz people, and Islam spread among Uzbeks earlier than among the Kyrgyz. The largest religious organisation in Kyrgyzstan is the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Kyrgyzstan. The largest Christian organisation is the Russian Orthodox Church (Chotaeva, 2005).

The dynamics of the “religious renaissance” in Kyrgyzstan during the era of independence are evidenced by clear statistics. At the time of independence, Kyrgyzstan officially had only 39 mosques and 25 Orthodox churches. By 2006, there were already 1,619 mosques and 343 Christian religious sites in Kyrgyzstan. In particular, in 2006, Kyrgyzstan had 48 communities of Evangelical Christians-Baptists, 46 Orthodox churches, 45 Pentecostal communities, 41 Jehovah’s Witnesses organisations, 30 Seventh-day Adventist communities, 20 Lutheran communities, 18 Presbyterian communities, 16 charismatic communities, 43 communities of other Christian denominations, 3 Roman Catholic communities, and 2 Old Believer churches. By 2006, 12 Bahá’í communities, 1 Jewish community, and 1 Buddhist community were registered in Kyrgyzstan (Concept state policy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the religious sphere, 2006). Subsequently, the number of religious communities and organisations in Kyrgyzstan continued to increase. By 2014, there were 2,362 functioning mosques and 81 Islamic educational institutions in Kyrgyzstan, and the number of Christian religious sites had increased to 378. By 2014, Kyrgyzstan had 56 Pentecostal communities, 50 Baptist communities, 49 parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church, 43 charismatic communities, 41 Jehovah’s Witnesses organisations, 38 Presbyterian communities, 31 Seventh-day Adventist communities, 4 Roman Catholic communities, and 18 communities of other Christian denominations.

The activities of 12 Bahá’í communities, 1 Jewish, and 1 Buddhist organisation also continued (Concept state policy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the religious sphere for 2014-2020, 2014). As of 2021, 3348 religious organisations were officially registered in Kyrgyzstan. Of these, 2930 are Islamic, 404 – Christian, 12 – Bahá’í communities, 1 – Jewish, and 1 –Buddhist community (Concept state policy..., 2021). As of 2023, Kyrgyzstan has 2968 Islamic and 402 Christian religious organisations, including 81 Pentecostal communities, 60 Baptist communities, 47 parishes of the Russian Orthodox Church, 47 Presbyterian communities, 41 charismatic communities, 41 Jehovah’s Witnesses organisations, 25 Seventh-day Adventist communities, 20 Lutheran communities, 8 Roman Catholic communities, 5 Evangelical communities, 1 Old Believer church, and 26 communities of other Christian denominations. Moreover, 12 Bahá’í communities continue their activities in Kyrgyzstan (Religious organisations, 2023).

Therefore, during the years of independence, the number of religious organisations in Kyrgyzstan steadily increased. This trend applied to both Muslim and Christian communities. It is worth noting that while the ratio of Muslims to Christians in Kyrgyzstan changed dramatically in favour of Muslims, the decrease in the overall number of Christians in Kyrgyzstan did not impact the continuous increase in Christian religious organisations. This phenomenon can be attributed to both the “religious renaissance” among Christians in Kyrgyzstan and the active efforts of religious leaders and support from various Christian communities from abroad (Turarbekova et al., 2022).

Table 1. Dynamics of the number of religious organisations in Kyrgyzstan since the declaration of independence

Year	Number of Islamic religious organisations	Number of Christian religious organisations	Number of organisations of other religions
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1991	39	25	0
2006	1619	343	14
2014	2362	378	14
2021	2930	404	14
2023	2968	402	12

Source: compiled by the authors.

As evident from Table 1, the number of Islamic organisations in Kyrgyzstan has grown significantly since independence. The Islamisation process occurred most rapidly in the early years of independence, and the dynamics slightly decreased in the latter half of the 2010s. In addition, the number of Christian religious organisations, especially Protestant ones, also increased. The activities of religious organisations in Kyrgyzstan are regulated by corresponding legislative acts, which declare Kyrgyzstan as a secular state with freedom of religion and freedom for various religious organisations to operate unless their activities pose a threat to national security or the safety of Kyrgyz citizens. Every citizen of the Kyrgyz Republic is free to choose their religion, and practice religious rituals, and beliefs. The fundamental legislative act regulating the religious life of society is the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic “On Freedom of Religion and Religious Organisations in the Kyrgyz Republic” (2008). The Concept state policy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the religious sphere (2006; 2014; 2021) was approved based on the corresponding Presidential Decrees.

The political situation in Kyrgyzstan over the more than thirty years of independence has resulted in a unique circumstance, unlike neighbouring Central Asian countries. None of the political regimes have managed to stay in power for long. The political turnover, often due to popular uprisings, has contributed to the state refraining from significantly interfering in the religious lives of its citizens (Spyska, 2023). This situation has fostered the development of religious freedoms in Kyrgyzstan, allowing religious organisations, primarily of an Islamic nature, to operate more freely than in neighbouring countries (Engvall, 2020). However, this established environment presents a danger of growing extremism and the spread of extremist ideas among young Kyrgyz people under the guise of religious propaganda. This threat is further exacerbated by the fact that religious activities in Kyrgyzstan are often supported from abroad. With such support, non-traditional Islamic movements gained ground among the youth in Kyrgyzstan during the years of independence. The democratic nature of the political regime in the Kyrgyz Republic and the leniency of its legislation have resulted in allowing the activities of certain religious movements that are prohibited in neighbouring post-Soviet Central Asian states (Doszhan, 2023). This is particularly true for the “Tablighi Jamaat” movement. This movement, which advocates the widespread dissemination of orthodox Islamic teachings among every Muslim believer, arrived in Kyrgyzstan from Pakistan in the 1990s. Initially, missionaries of Tablighi Jamaat were exclusively foreign citizens; however, from the 2000s onwards, more and more young Kyrgyz people joined the ranks of its preachers.

It is worth noting that the strict adherence to Islamic rules and norms preached by Tablighi Jamaat was not historically typical of the Kyrgyz people. Therefore, the spread of orthodox Islam can be considered a new phenomenon in Kyrgyzstan (Hasanov, 2017). The younger generation is often susceptible to new phenomena and trends. Religious leaders take into account the psychological characteristics of young people, their social status, and the political situation in the country. Apart from Tablighi Jamaat, the religious movement “Ahmadiyya,” which emerged in the 20th century in British India, has gained some traction among Kyrgyz youth. More radical Islamic movements, such as Salafism, which are officially banned in the Kyrgyz Republic, also find their way into Kyrgyzstan from other Islamic countries (Osmonova, 2019). Due to the prolonged period of religious suppression during the Soviet era, religious education among a significant portion of Kyrgyzstan’s population remains low. Consequently, Kyrgyz youth exploring their faith often resort to foreign preachers whose views frequently contradict the religious traditions established in Kyrgyzstan. These factors influence the shifting religious landscape in Kyrgyzstan (Kurbanova, 2014).

The religious sentiments and the level of religiosity among Kyrgyz youth are reflected in a survey conducted in 2023 using questionnaires among students in the city of Bishkek. 99% of the respondents identified themselves as believers, with only 1% considering themselves atheists. 90%



of those surveyed identified themselves as followers of Islam, 8.5% as adherents of Christianity, and 0.5% as adherents of other religions. Such data indicate a fairly high religious consciousness of the youth of Kyrgyzstan. These data indicate a relatively high level of religious self-awareness among Kyrgyz youth. At the same time, a significant number of respondents demonstrated a relatively low familiarity with sacred religious texts and irregular performance of religious rites and practices. For example, among Muslim respondents, only 50% read the Quran, and among Christian respondents, 45% read the Bible. Only 12% of Muslim respondents performed the obligatory five daily prayers regularly. 25% of Muslim respondents regularly attended mosques, while 20% of Christian respondents regularly attended churches. 23.5% of Muslim respondents observed the mandatory fast during the holy month of Ramadan, and 13% of Christian respondents observed the Great Lent before Easter. 5.5% of Christian respondents observed all fasting periods throughout the year. When asked about their religiosity, 68.5% of the respondents described themselves as moderately religious, 18% said they considered themselves believers but had limited interest in religious matters, and only 12.5% of the respondents, considering themselves believers, stated that they were very religious.

Ultimately, based on the results of the conducted survey, it can be deduced that although the overwhelming majority of young people in Kyrgyzstan consider themselves believers, only a small portion of the youth is highly religious. In addition, only about half of the young people are familiar with the sacred texts of religions, indicating, among other things, a low level of religious education among the youth. Overall, these religious characteristics of the youth in Kyrgyzstan create a wide field for the missionary activities of various religious missions. Thus, the liberal state policy regarding religion and the secular nature of the Kyrgyz Republic influences the formation of the youth's religious culture in that the young population in Kyrgyzstan is freer in choosing religious practices compared to residents of neighbouring Central Asian countries. Global trends, the active involvement of preachers from other Muslim countries, and the post-Soviet phenomenon of the "religious renaissance" contribute to the spread of religious movements that are non-traditional for Kyrgyzstan among the youth and an increase in religiousness among the population. From this, it can be concluded that Kyrgyzstan is gradually becoming a more religious country.

## Discussion

The established confessional situation in Kyrgyzstan and the influence of the interaction between politics and religion on it have been the subject of various studies by researchers interested in this matter. When discussing the confessional culture of the youth in Kyrgyzstan and its influence, researchers have noted the rapid spread of non-traditional Islamic religious movements in the years of independence. As researchers indicate, one of the key reasons for such a phenomenon is the long period of anti-religious policies by the Soviet government, followed by a sharp shift in political course towards religious liberalism in the years of independence.

One Kyrgyz researcher who has explored this issue is D.A. Osmonova (2019). The author, among other things, examined the spread of non-traditional Islamic religious movements in Kyrgyzstan during the years of independence. The author sees a certain threat to national security in the rapid popularity of religious movements such as "Tablighi Jamaat", "Ahmadiyya", and the Salafi movement among the country's youth. According to the researcher, both state and official religious leaders should develop a unified religious policy with clear ideological guidelines to prevent the possible spread of more radical and extremist movements. In general, it is possible to agree with the author's main thesis regarding the causes and consequences of the spread of non-traditional religious movements among the youth of Kyrgyzstan. However, it is important to note that the liberal nature of the religious policy and the democratic political regime of the Kyrgyz Republic constitute a peculiar advantage for Kyrgyzstan over neighbouring countries, bringing Kyrgyzstan closer to democratic states rather than authoritarian ones (Kelman & Kelman, 2022).

The dissertation by U.A. Sharshenaliev (2012) is dedicated to Muslim organisations' influence on Kyrgyzstan's political life. The author focuses on the process of the "religious renaissance" in Kyrgyzstan in the context of a similar process in neighbouring post-Soviet states. The researcher





emphasises the significant increase in the number of Muslim religious organisations in Kyrgyzstan during the years of independence, which naturally contributes to their growing influence in the country's socio-political life and the formation of the religious culture of Kyrgyz youth. According to the author, the official clergy of Kyrgyzstan has a relatively weak influence on the country's socio-political life, and Kyrgyzstan's confessional culture is characterized by moderate Islam that does not endorse religious fanaticism and extremism. The liberal religious policy of the state supports such a culture. However, it is difficult to agree with the author's thesis about the weak influence of religious organisations on the social life of Kyrgyzstan. On the other hand, as noted by S.O. Zhunushova (2020), the current liberal religious policy leads to the rapid spread of radical Islam among young people, posing a direct threat to the national security of the country and the region as a whole. To counter and prevent various manifestations of religious extremism, special attention should be paid to the religious education of young people, and a registry of desirable foreign religious educational institutions should be created (Kim et al., 2022).

N. Kurbanova (2014) discusses the issues of Islamic education in Kyrgyzstan. The researcher notes that in contemporary Kyrgyzstan, the system of religious Islamic education remains at a low level and needs improvement. According to the author, in the early years of independence, Islamic education in Kyrgyzstan was mainly shaped by foreign religious organisations. The lack of a clear state policy in this regard can negatively impact the religious worldview of Kyrgyz youth by possibly spreading radical extremist ideas. The lack of knowledge often leads to the wrong path, which, under the guise of religion, can lead to a dangerous ending. Thus, it is possible to agree with the main theses of the scholar and emphasise the particular need for the formation, with the participation of state structures, of a network of educational institutions that would provide quality Islamic education to the youth of Kyrgyzstan.

The interaction between religion and the secular state in Kyrgyzstan is the focus of the study by J. Engvall (2020). The researcher provides a general overview of the established religious situation and confessional culture in contemporary Kyrgyzstan, relying on statistical data. The author discusses the history of the development of the modern confessional culture in Kyrgyzstan, which is related to the relatively late spread of Islam among the ethnic Kyrgyz and the prolonged period of dominance of communist atheist ideology. When discussing the contemporary situation, the author, like other researchers, highlights the activation of foreign preachers in independent Kyrgyzstan and the influence on the confessional culture of Kyrgyz youth by other economically stronger states, such as Turkey. Although the author does not focus specifically on the issue of the religiousness of Kyrgyz youth, the theses of the scholar's work apply to the study of the confessional culture of contemporary Kyrgyz youth.

The states of Central Asia are the subject of the work by M. Laurelle (2021). In this work, the author pays attention to the religious aspect of the societies in Central Asian states. The author emphasises the multi-ethnic composition of the populations of these countries and the religious identity of various ethnic groups. The paper by I. Trysnes and R.M. Synnes (2022) is dedicated to the religious self-identification of young people in modern social networks. The researchers emphasise the increased role of religious self-identification among representatives of various ethnic groups, indicating the connection between religious and ethnic identity. For modern Kyrgyz youth, the connection between religious and ethnic identity remains relevant. However, the study by these scholars may not fully represent the entire picture of the stated issue, as it involves a limited number of young people involved in Western culture and lifestyles.

The religious movement "Ahmadiyya," which is gaining popularity in the Islamic world and particularly in Kyrgyzstan, is the subject of the study by E.V. Gallagher and L. Willsky-Ciollo (2021). The authors provide information about the origins of this religious movement in British India and discuss the reasons for its growing popularity in contemporary times and its interaction with traditional Islam, within which the "Ahmadiyya" movement is considered sectarian. Nowadays, more and more young people in Kyrgyzstan are becoming interested in new non-traditional religious movements. In addition, the "Ahmadiyya" movement operates freely and legally in Kyrgyzstan. The conclusions of the researchers provide a certain understanding of how popular this movement can be among young



people in various Islamic countries. Thus, most researchers who have studied this problem agree that, as of today, politics has relatively little effect on the confessional culture of the youth of Kyrgyzstan. Due to the uncontrolled spread of various non-traditional religious movements among young people and the underdeveloped system of religious education, authorities should pay more substantial attention to the religious upbringing of the country's younger generation.

In their research, Kogan et al. (2020) investigate how religion influences the socioeconomic and cultural assimilation of immigrants and minority groups. This study pays special attention to the experiences of young immigrants, underscoring the critical period of adolescence and early adulthood in shaping future integration paths, as further explored by Kim and Chung (2023). The complexities and subtleties in the interplay between religious beliefs, especially Islam, and various life outcomes such as inter-ethnic relationships, sexual norms, behaviors perceived as deviant, and educational achievements are thoroughly examined. This research also sheds light on the varied effects that minority religions can have on either aiding or obstructing integration processes. It emphasizes the need to understand how discrimination impacts minorities with certain religious ties, particularly Muslims.

Jensen's (2021) study provides an in-depth look at how religiosity, spirituality, and secularism evolve among adolescents from diverse cultural backgrounds. This investigation emphasizes the necessity of incorporating cultural factors into the psychological analysis of individuals. It covers a range of topics, including adolescents' views on deities, the afterlife, the emergence of a Divinity-based ethical framework in moral reasoning, recent trends towards increased spirituality and secularism, and how globalization affects worldviews and religious puberty ceremonies.

Furthermore, Petrikova (2018) in her research contributes to this dialogue by investigating the interconnections between religion and political perspectives. This study, encompassing a broad spectrum of countries, assesses the influence of religious faith, community, and practices on people's views on international policies. The findings reveal that religion generally amplifies militant internationalist attitudes, while its impact on cooperative internationalist perspectives remains unclear. The study notes that frequent participation in religious activities, self-identification as a religious individual, and being a follower of Islam appear to encourage more altruistic views in foreign policy. In contrast, connections to Christianity and other religions like Hinduism and Buddhism might lead to different outcomes.

The transition from Soviet-era anti-religious policies to post-independence religious liberalism has facilitated the rapid growth of non-traditional Islamic movements among young people. While concerns about potential threats to national security persist, there is a consensus among researchers that a unified religious policy with clear ideological guidelines is crucial to counteract the spread of radical ideologies (Bazilova et al., 2016). Additionally, the role of Islamic education and the need for state-sponsored educational institutions to provide quality religious education to Kyrgyz youth are highlighted. These studies collectively emphasize the multifaceted nature of the relationship between politics, religion, and youth in Kyrgyzstan, with implications for both national security and the cultural and social integration of the younger generation.

## Conclusions

Compared to other Central Asian states, Kyrgyzstan is distinguished by its more democratic political regime and liberal legislation. This feature has an impact on the religious situation in the country. Due to the policy of building a secular state and the support from the authorities for the equal development of various religious denominations, different religious organisations can freely operate and develop in Kyrgyzstan. Some religious organisations, such as "Tablighi Jamaat," which are banned in other Central Asian countries, operate legally in Kyrgyzstan. This situation contributes to the development of religious diversity and a polyconfessional culture among Kyrgyz youth.



Traditional for Kyrgyzstan are Sunni Islam, belonging to the Hanafi School of Jurisprudence, and Orthodox Christianity, predominantly practiced by ethnic Russians and representatives of other Slavic nationalities. In the years of independence, non-traditional Islamic movements, Protestantism, and several Baha'i communities have spread in Kyrgyzstan. New religious movements are especially gaining popularity among young people. Religious organisations often attract young people to preaching activities. Nevertheless, the overall level of religious education in Kyrgyzstan remains relatively low. This situation might facilitate the penetration of radical ideas into the youth community of Kyrgyzstan. Therefore, the state should develop a clearer and unambiguous policy regarding religion, without violating the fundamental principles of religious freedom that have become customary in independent Kyrgyzstan.

The scientific originality of this paper lies in the fact that it explores the aspect of the religious life of Kyrgyzstan, such as the confessional culture of youth through the prism of the interaction between politics and religion. Further studies into Kyrgyzstan's religious landscape and its interaction with politics hold great potential. Research can focus on the coexistence of diverse religious groups, especially among the youth, and how government policies impact religious tolerance and freedom. Understanding the appeal of non-traditional religious movements and the potential for radicalization is crucial. Additionally, exploring the evolving state-religion relationship and proposing policy solutions is vital for maintaining stability in this dynamic region.

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