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Baptist and Pentecostal churches in post-Soviet Kazakhstan: Religious freedom, cultural translation and social cohesion

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Abstract

This article examines the place of Baptist and Pentecostal churches in post-Soviet Kazakhstan through the linked questions of religious freedom, cultural translation and social cohesion. The central argument is that Protestant communities in Kazakhstan should not be read only through the binaries of 'missionary expansion' and 'state control'. Rather, they occupy an ambivalent position: they are minority actors whose charitable work, local congregational life and moral discipline can strengthen social trust, yet they are also regularly framed as 'nontraditional' communities whose transnational ties make them vulnerable to suspicion. The study uses qualitative documentary analysis of legislation, official statistics, international religious-freedom reporting and secondary scholarship on religion in Central Asia. It combines three interpretive lenses: post-Soviet secularism, acculturation and hybridity, and the social ethic associated with Khoja Ahmed Yasawi. The article shows that Baptist communities have generally relied on decentralized congregational organization, practical service and gradual linguistic localization, while Pentecostal churches have been more visible in urban settings through charismatic worship, youth outreach and transnational networks. In both cases, the constitutional promise of freedom of religion is moderated by a legal regime that requires registration, regulates missionary activity and allows extensive administrative oversight. The article concludes that Baptist and Pentecostal churches can contribute to social cohesion in Kazakhstan most effectively when they cultivate cultural intelligibility, use locally resonant moral vocabularies and prioritize service over confrontation. At the same time, their integration remains conditional because Kazakhstan's model of secular governance continues to distinguish between officially 'traditional' religions and other communities whose legitimacy is never fully secure.

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Keywords: Baptists, Pentecostals, Kazakhstan, religious freedom, social cohesion

Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union (1991) transformed the religious landscape of Kazakhstan. A society that had lived for decades under a state-sponsored atheistic order entered the post-1991 period with renewed public interest in religion, rapidly expanding institutional diversity and a new legal vocabulary of rights, registration and regulation. Islam and Russian Orthodoxy remained the most visible religious traditions, but independence also created space for Catholic, Protestant and newer religious communities to consolidate their presence. According to the results of the 2021 census, more than 69 percent of the population identified as Muslim and 17 percent as Christian, confirming both the Muslim majority character of the country and the continuing significance of Christian minorities in the national religious field (Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023; USCIRF, 2024).

Among these Christian minorities, Baptist and Pentecostal churches deserve closer scholarly attention. Their importance does not lie merely in numbers. They are analytically significant because they illuminate larger questions about minority religion in a Muslim-majority but constitutionally secular state: how religious communities localize transnational traditions; how governments manage pluralism while claiming neutrality; and how social service, public morality and cultural suspicion interact in everyday religious life. In official discourse and public debate, these churches are often grouped under the category of 'nontraditional' religion. Yet this label can obscure substantial differences in ecclesiology, worship style, leadership structure and strategies of public engagement.

Existing scholarship has offered valuable historical and sociological insight into Christianity in Central Asia, post-Soviet secularization and state management of religion (Casanova, 1994; Froese, 2008; Khalid, 2007; Peyrouse, 2012). However, Baptists and Pentecostals in Kazakhstan are still frequently discussed only in passing, either as examples of missionary expansion or as objects of restrictive regulation. Less attention has been given to the cultural work these communities must perform if they are to become intelligible within a society where Islam, nomadic memory, Soviet modernity and state secularism all continue to shape public norms. This article therefore asks three related questions. First, how have Baptist and Pentecostal churches positioned themselves within Kazakhstan's post-Soviet religious order? Second, what forms of cultural translation and acculturation have they employed? Third, to what extent can their social practices be interpreted through the ethical language associated with Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, whose legacy remains central to Kazakh understandings of spirituality, humility and communal solidarity?

Yasawi is used here not as a shorthand for Kazakh social norms as a whole, but as a historically grounded and analytically specific ethical reference point within Kazakh and broader Turkic-Islamic memory. Broader Kazakh social norms, including hospitality, respect for elders, communal obligation and social restraint, are diverse and regionally variable; treating them as a single explanatory category would risk essentializing Kazakh culture. Yasawi's legacy is more precise for the purposes of this article because it links these values to a recognizable religious-cultural genealogy: Turkic-language spirituality, Sufi moral discipline, humility, service and communal responsibility. For this reason, Yasawi functions in this study as a local moral vocabulary through which the public intelligibility of minority Christian communities can be assessed, rather than as evidence of doctrinal convergence between Protestantism and Sufism (Köprülü, 2006; Privratsky, 2001). The available documentary sources do not indicate that Baptist or Pentecostal communities in Kazakhstan explicitly invoke Yasawi's legacy in their own theological self-presentation. Accordingly, the argument is deliberately limited: it does not claim direct Baptist or Pentecostal engagement with Yasawi, but uses Yasawi as an external interpretive frame for

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assessing whether Protestant practices such as sobriety, care for vulnerable families, disciplined community life and locally understandable service can become socially legible within Kazakhstan's moral landscape.

The argument advanced here is that Baptist and Pentecostal churches function as ambivalent social actors. They contribute to civil life through charity, discipline, fellowship and youth work, but they also remain vulnerable to suspicion because their transnational origins and missionary identities can be read as signs of cultural distance. Baptists tend to gain legitimacy through modest congregational structures, moral conservatism and service-oriented witness. Pentecostals often gain visibility through emotionally expressive worship, urban networking and youth appeal, but that same visibility can intensify public and bureaucratic scrutiny. Their place in Kazakhstan is therefore neither one of simple integration nor inevitable marginalization. It is better understood as a negotiated and unequal process of cultural translation inside a regime of managed religious pluralism.

The question of ethnic Kazakh converts adds another layer to this ambivalence. Although Protestant Christianity in Kazakhstan has historically been associated with Russian-speaking, German, Korean and other minority communities, recent qualitative studies indicate that ethnic Kazakhs who convert to Christianity are also present, especially in urban and Russified environments. Such conversions are not only religious acts but can also be interpreted socially as shifts in cultural and ethnic belonging, because Kazakh identity is often publicly associated with Islam, even when actual levels of religious knowledge or practice vary considerably. For this reason, conversion may create tensions within families and kinship networks, particularly where relatives understand Christianity as a departure from ancestral religion or national-cultural continuity. The available evidence also suggests that mixed religious households and interfaith marriages can function both as pathways of religious change and as sites of negotiation, although there is insufficient evidence to generalize about their frequency among Baptist and Pentecostal communities specifically. These dynamics reinforce the article's central argument: Baptist and Pentecostal churches are not simply external missionary actors, but communities whose presence is negotiated through intimate questions of family loyalty, language, ethnicity and social belonging (Kaliyev et al., 2025).

Methodology and analytical framework

This article is a qualitative study based on documentary analysis rather than original interviews or survey research. It draws on four bodies of material: scholarly literature on religion in Kazakhstan and Central Asia; legal texts governing religion in Kazakhstan; current official statistics and state descriptions of the religious sphere; and international reporting on religious freedom conditions. This design allows the article to reconstruct the institutional environment within which Baptist and Pentecostal churches operate while avoiding the common problem of repeating unsupported numerical claims about church growth or conversion. Because the purpose is analytical rather than confessional, the study treats Baptist and Pentecostal communities as social institutions whose public significance emerges through law, discourse, organization and practice.

Three conceptual lenses guide the analysis. The first is post-Soviet secularism. Casanova's distinction between secular statecraft and the public visibility of religion remains useful here, but the Kazakhstani case also requires attention to the Soviet inheritance, where religion was not merely privatized but administratively contained and culturally delegitimized (Casanova, 1994; Froese, 2008). The second lens is acculturation and hybridity. Berry's framework helps explain how minority communities adapt, separate, integrate or become marginalized in relation to a dominant environment, while broader postcolonial discussions of hybridity illuminate how imported and local forms can be recombined without dissolving tension (Berry, 2005; Spivak,

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1988). The third lens is the ethical legacy of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi. Yasawi's significance in Kazakhstan is not limited to doctrinal theology; he is also remembered as a moral figure whose authority is tied to humility, service, spiritual discipline and care for the community. UNESCO's description of the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi underscores his enduring place in Kazakhstan's religious memory, while earlier scholarship has shown the importance of his legacy to regional Islam and collective identity (Köprülü, 2006; UNESCO, n.d.).

Using Yasawi as an interpretive frame does not imply that Baptist or Pentecostal theology is reducible to Sufism, nor does it suggest doctrinal convergence. Rather, it provides a culturally grounded way to assess which forms of minority Christian presence become intelligible and legitimate in a Kazakh environment. A church may remain theologically distinct while still becoming socially legible through practices that resonate with local moral expectations such as hospitality, sobriety, neighborly care and communal responsibility. This distinction is crucial. The issue is not whether Protestant churches become 'Kazakh' by abandoning their convictions, but whether they can inhabit public life without reproducing the perception that they stand outside the country's moral universe.

A further methodological point concerns evidence and scope. Scholarship on Protestantism in Central Asia sometimes reproduces dramatic growth claims, dramatic conversion narratives or anecdotal reports of conflict without adequate source criticism. This article avoids that tendency by privileging materials that can be checked: legislation, official statistical descriptions, peer-reviewed scholarship and institutional reports. This choice inevitably narrows what can be said about lived experience at the congregational level, but it strengthens the reliability of the claims advanced here. The article therefore does not attempt to estimate conversion rates, provide undocumented membership statistics or generalize from isolated incidents. Its purpose is to clarify the structural and cultural conditions under which Baptist and Pentecostal churches seek legitimacy.

The study is limited in three ways. First, documentary analysis cannot replace ethnographic observation of worship, neighborhood interaction or intra-church debates. Second, official statistics capture registered entities rather than actual levels of practice, commitment or public influence. Third, international religious-freedom reports can foreground restriction more than everyday accommodation. These limitations do not invalidate the analysis, but they do mean that the article should be read as an interpretive account of institutional positioning rather than as a full sociology of Protestant life in Kazakhstan. Future research would benefit from comparative fieldwork in Almaty, Astana, Shymkent and smaller regional centers where patterns of language use, ethnic composition and state oversight may differ substantially.

Historical background: Soviet rupture and post-Soviet reopening

The post-Soviet Protestant moment in Kazakhstan cannot be understood without the Soviet experience that preceded it. Soviet power did not simply reduce public religion; it reorganized the conditions under which religion could survive. Clergy were monitored, communities were deregistered, worship was driven inward and religious identity was often detached from public institutional continuity. Yet repression did not eliminate belief. Rather, it produced fragmented religious memories and uneven subterranean traditions that resurfaced after 1991 in forms shaped by both suppression and survival. Froese (2008) has shown that the Soviet attempt to produce a secular social order did not eradicate religion so much as transform its social carriers and public grammar.

For Protestant communities, this inheritance mattered in two ways. First, Soviet-era Baptist and evangelical networks had preserved certain habits of scriptural seriousness, lay initiative and resilience under pressure. These habits proved valuable in the 1990s, when new legal openings emerged but institutional infrastructure remained fragile. Second, the collapse of Soviet ideology

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left a moral and social vacuum that many religious communities sought to address. Protestant churches did not enter an empty space, but they did enter a society in which long-suppressed questions of meaning, ethics and belonging had become newly urgent. Their appeal must therefore be read in relation not only to missionary activism but also to the crisis of post-Soviet social reproduction (Kurmanbek et al. 2025a).

Kazakhstan's specific social composition further shaped this religious reopening. The country's ethnic diversity, strong Russian-speaking sphere and history of deportation and migration created conditions different from those in more religiously homogeneous societies. Protestantism was not an entirely alien insertion into a purely Muslim environment; it also developed through communities already present within Kazakhstan, including Slavic and Korean populations, and through urban spaces where Soviet cosmopolitanism persisted after independence. This helps explain why Protestant churches could establish a durable presence even while remaining culturally contested. They were both inside and outside the national narrative: socially real, institutionally present and yet often symbolically marked as secondary to the country's 'traditional' religious matrix.

Post-Soviet transformation and the religious field in Kazakhstan

Religious change in Kazakhstan after 1991 unfolded within a paradox. Independence created new opportunities for religious association, missionary activity and international connection, yet it also intensified the state's interest in defining which forms of religion were socially acceptable. In the first years after independence, the loosening of Soviet restrictions allowed many communities to rebuild institutional life. This was true for Muslim revival, Orthodox reorganization and Protestant mission alike. The result was not a simple 'return of religion' but a reconfiguration of the public sphere, in which religion became newly visible, socially desirable for some, politically useful for others and administratively manageable for the state (Kurmanbek et al. 2025b).

Over time, this environment hardened into a system that can best be described as managed pluralism. The constitution presents Kazakhstan as a secular state and protects freedom of religion, yet the legal regime also places substantial emphasis on registration, missionary oversight and expert review of religious materials. The 2011 Law on Religious Activities and Religious Associations, as amended through 2025, remains the central framework regulating the formation and operation of religious communities (Republic of Kazakhstan, 2011/2025). International observers have consistently argued that this framework restricts the activities of groups classified as 'nontraditional', especially when they are unregistered or active outside narrowly defined places of worship (USCIRF, 2024).

Official data illustrate the complexity of this field. Government information published for the fourth quarter of 2024 reports 3,999 registered religious entities in Kazakhstan, of which 592 were Protestant, alongside 421 Protestant prayer houses. The same source lists 452 officially registered missionaries, including 70 Pentecostals and 5 Baptists (Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024). These figures do not tell us how many believers actually participate in Baptist or Pentecostal congregational life, but they do show that Protestant Christianity is institutionally present and administratively visible. They also reveal the asymmetry between legal recognition and public legitimacy: registration secures a place in the state's system, but it does not automatically remove the perception that such communities are culturally foreign.

The broader religious profile of Kazakhstan further sharpens this point. The distinction between legal recognition and wider social legitimacy is supported by several types of evidence, although it should be understood as an analytical inference rather than as a direct measurement of public attitudes. Official data show that Protestant communities are legally present in Kazakhstan: government information for the fourth quarter of 2024 lists 592 Protestant religious entities and 421 Protestant prayer houses, as well as registered Protestant missionaries, including

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Pentecostal and Baptist representatives (Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024). At the same time, international religious-freedom reporting notes that Kazakhstan's public and administrative discourse differentiates between religions considered "traditional" to the country, especially Hanafi Sunni Islam and Russian Orthodoxy, and communities treated as "nontraditional" (USCIRF, 2024; U.S. Department of State, 2023). This distinction is important because legal registration does not automatically remove cultural suspicion. A religious community may be formally registered and still be perceived as foreign, missionary-oriented or weakly connected to national historical memory. Minority churches therefore operate in a space where administrative permission, public trust and moral acceptance do not necessarily coincide. Baptist churches: Congregational life, moral discipline and local legitimacy

Baptist Christianity in Kazakhstan has deep historical roots extending back into the late imperial and Soviet periods, especially through Slavic settlement and later underground religious life. In the post-Soviet era, Baptist communities developed along at least two broad trajectories. One was the legally registered congregational stream associated with Baptist unions and public worship. The other was the Council of Churches tradition, which continued to reject state registration on principle as an intrusion into the life of the church. International religious freedom reporting has noted that some Baptists continue to refuse registration for theological reasons, even while facing fines and administrative pressure for unregistered activity (U.S. Embassy and Consulate in Kazakhstan, 2022).

From a sociological perspective, the Baptist presence has often been more legible to local society than its numerical scale might suggest. This is partly because Baptist life is usually organized around relatively small congregations, moral discipline, Bible study, sobriety, family ethics and regular mutual aid. Such features do not erase perceptions of foreignness, but they can make Baptist communities appear less spectacular and therefore less threatening than more visibly charismatic groups. Froese (2008) and Pelkmans (2009) both show that post-Soviet conversion frequently involved not only doctrinal conviction but also a search for order, ethical clarity and practical community. The Baptist tradition's emphasis on disciplined everyday life fits this pattern well.

This relative intelligibility also derives from the way many Baptist communities bear witness in public. Their mode of outreach has historically relied less on dramatic public ritual and more on relationship-building, study circles, charity and personal testimony. In contexts where public suspicion of missionary activity remains strong, such forms of witness can reduce symbolic distance between church and neighborhood. They allow the congregation to be encountered not first as a 'foreign sect' but as a community of morally serious people who help the poor, care for families and maintain internal discipline. This does not solve the problem of legitimacy, but it alters the terms on which legitimacy is negotiated (USCIRF, 2024).

Language is especially important in this regard. The historical association of Protestant Christianity with Russian-speaking minorities has often hindered deeper localization among ethnic Kazakhs. Yet the emergence of Kazakh-speaking evangelical and Baptist fellowships indicates an ongoing effort to translate not merely sermons but congregational belonging itself into a more locally resonant idiom. Such localization is not automatic. It requires attention to naming, music, patterns of authority and the avoidance of forms of witness that imply cultural superiority. Where Baptist churches succeed in this translation, they are more likely to be perceived as a recognized part of local civil society rather than a temporary outpost of an external religious culture (Meirmanov et al. 2026).

At the same time, the Baptist case reveals the limits of service-based legitimacy. Registration disputes remain consequential, and the law continues to burden communities that do not wish to submit fully to the state's framework. The issue is not simply bureaucratic. For many Baptists, the

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autonomy of the congregation is part of their theology. The friction between congregational freedom and administrative oversight therefore becomes a test case for the actual depth of religious freedom in Kazakhstan. Baptists can be socially useful, morally conservative and publicly peaceful, yet still encounter penalties if they operate beyond what the law permits (Zhorabek et al. 2025).

Pentecostal churches: Urban charisma, transnational networks and public suspicion

Pentecostal Christianity occupies a different but equally significant position in Kazakhstan's religious landscape. If Baptists are often associated with moral steadiness and congregational modesty, Pentecostals are more often associated with visibility, mobility and intensity. Their worship is marked by emotional expressiveness, healing narratives, musical performance and strong emphasis on spiritual experience. In a post-Soviet setting where many people sought affective meaning and new forms of belonging after the collapse of ideological certainties, this style of religion could be particularly attractive, especially in urban environments (Zhorabek et al. 2025).

Pentecostal growth in Kazakhstan has also been shaped by transnational networks, including connections to Korean, Russian and broader evangelical circuits. Scholars of Christianity in Central Asia have long noted the importance of diaspora and missionary infrastructures in the spread of Protestant groups across the region (Kim, 2005; Peyrouse, 2012). In the Pentecostal case, such networks often supplied pastors, funding, organizational models and liturgical repertoires. These connections enabled rapid institution-building, but they also increased the likelihood that Pentecostal churches would be seen as culturally imported. What strengthens capacity may simultaneously weaken public trust.

This tension is clearest in the urban sphere. Pentecostal churches have frequently been most successful in large cities, where post-Soviet social mobility, youth culture and media-savvy religious expression converge. Their music, testimony and therapeutic language can speak powerfully to students, migrants and young professionals searching for community. Yet the same features that make these churches appealing to urban constituencies can also draw suspicion from local authorities, journalists and conservative religious actors. The more public and charismatic the church, the more easily it can be represented as manipulative, foreign-funded or socially disruptive.

Pentecostal communities thus face a particular challenge of cultural translation. Their theology need not change, but their public form cannot remain entirely detached from local sensibilities if they seek long-term legitimacy. Here hybridity becomes an important concept. A Pentecostal congregation that incorporates the Kazakh language, invests in stable pastoral care, frames charity in locally intelligible terms and avoids triumphalist rhetoric is likely to reduce symbolic distance. By contrast, a church that appears only as an imported performance style may remain trapped within narratives of cultural invasion. The issue is not emotional worship as such. Kazakhstan has its own rich traditions of spirituality and affect. The problem emerges when charismatic expression is detached from recognizable forms of local responsibility.

Pentecostal communities retain significant institutional presence. The government's 2024 profile of the religious sphere lists Pentecostals among the most visible missionary traditions in the country, with 70 officially registered missionaries, far more than the number recorded for Baptists (Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024). This likely reflects both the stronger transnational missionary profile of Pentecostal networks and the state's closer administrative attention to them. Greater visibility can expand reach, but it also intensifies regulation.

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Table 1. Comparative patterns of Baptist and Pentecostal public presence in Kazakhstan

Dimension	Baptist churches	Pentecostal churches	Analytical implication
Organizational profile	Congregation-centered, often decentralized, with strong lay participation	More networked and leadership-centered, often shaped by transnational ministry models	Institutional form influences how churches respond to registration and public scrutiny
Public style	Moral discipline, Bible study, pastoral care and modest public witness	Charismatic worship, testimony, healing language and visible youth outreach	Different public styles produce different levels of cultural intelligibility
Localization strategy	Gradual Kazakh-language adaptation and neighborhood-based service	Urban innovation, musical adaptation and selective localization through media and youth culture	Localization is possible in both traditions but operates through different channels
Primary source of suspicion	Refusal of registration among some communities and Protestant minority status	Perceptions of foreignness, emotional excess and transnational dependence	Legal vulnerability and symbolic vulnerability do not fall in exactly the same places
Potential contribution	Stability, sobriety, family support and durable local trust	Social energy, youth mobilization and urban bridge-building	Both can strengthen social cohesion when service and accountability outweigh confrontation

Religious freedom, registration and the secular state

The legal and administrative context is indispensable for understanding both Baptist and Pentecostal life in Kazakhstan. The constitution affirms freedom of religion, but the operational meaning of that freedom is mediated by legislation that requires registration, regulates missionary activity, subjects religious literature to review and limits unregistered worship. The 2011 religion law was a watershed in this respect. It formalized a system in which public religious activity became increasingly dependent on administrative recognition (Republic of Kazakhstan, 2011/2025). For minority communities, this produced a shift from relative post-independence openness to a more conditional environment (Aliyev et al. 2025).

The language of 'secularism' in Kazakhstan therefore requires careful interpretation. It does not simply mean state neutrality among all beliefs. It also signifies a state project of supervision in which religion is acceptable when it is legible, stable and non-threatening to national cohesion. Recent scholarship on religious policy in Kazakhstan has emphasized that regulation has often been tied to concerns about extremism, social order and the management of the Islamic field, but these frameworks also shape the treatment of Christian minorities (Gamza & Jones, 2021; Zhandossova et al., 2025). The result is a hierarchy of practical legitimacy in which some communities are recognized as historically rooted and others are tolerated under closer watch.

International reporting reinforces this picture. USCIRF's 2024 report stated that religious freedom conditions in Kazakhstan did not improve in 2023 and that the government continued to enforce a religion law restricting the activities of all religious groups while particularly burdening those deemed 'nontraditional'. The report recorded over 160 administrative fine cases in 2023 for peaceful religious activity and noted continuing penalties for unregistered worship and unauthorized religious distribution (USCIRF, 2024). Even when these cases do not target Baptists or Pentecostals specifically, they shape the environment in which Protestant communities make decisions about visibility, registration and mission.

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This environment produces uneven effects across Protestant traditions. The assumption underlying this argument is that Kazakhstan's registration regime imposes organizational thresholds and administrative costs that are easier for larger, more formalized religious communities to meet than for small, informal or anti-registration congregations. Under the current legal framework, local religious associations must meet minimum membership requirements, while regional and national associations require still larger membership bases and broader territorial organization. Religious activity is also tied to approved premises, regulated missionary activity and administrative procedures for religious literature and public events. These requirements do not formally target Baptists or Pentecostals as such, but they create unequal practical effects. Churches with stable leadership, legal expertise, financial resources and recognized premises are better positioned to comply, while smaller congregations, house fellowships and communities that object to registration on theological grounds remain more vulnerable to administrative pressure. The Council of Churches Baptist tradition illustrates this problem because some congregations refuse registration on principle and have faced penalties for unregistered worship. Small Pentecostal fellowships may face a related vulnerability when their activities are organized through informal meetings, rented spaces or fluid networks rather than through a strongly institutionalized structure (USCIRF, 2022; Forum 18, 2022, 2024).

It would be misleading, however, to depict Kazakhstan only as a site of repression. The country also sustains a significant degree of institutional religious diversity, and official discourse continues to celebrate interfaith harmony and national unity. The key point is that pluralism is neither absolute nor neutral. It is curated. Baptist and Pentecostal churches may exist, worship and serve, but they do so within a field where recognition is conditional and where the burden of proving social usefulness falls disproportionately on minority communities.

Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, moral translation and social cohesion

The legacy of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi offers a particularly helpful lens for evaluating the public role of minority Christian communities in Kazakhstan. Yasawi's significance in the region is not confined to the history of Sufism. He symbolizes a mode of spirituality rooted in humility, ethical formation, social obligation and the use of a culturally accessible language. His enduring status in Kazakhstan's religious memory means that appeals to service, neighborliness and moral discipline are not merely generic virtues; they are part of a locally recognizable moral field (Köprülü, 2006; UNESCO, n.d.).

Through this lens, the question is not whether Protestant theology overlaps with Yasawi's teaching in doctrinal terms. It does not. Rather, the question is whether Baptist and Pentecostal churches embody forms of social practice that can be recognized as morally serious within a society shaped by Yasawi-inflected understandings of spiritual authority. When churches care for vulnerable families, combat addiction, cultivate self-restraint and frame faith in terms of responsibility to others, they are more likely to be interpreted as participants in the moral life of the nation rather than as purely external agents.

Baptist churches generally have stronger advantages in this respect. Their ethic of sobriety, modesty, family discipline and practical service lends itself more readily to recognition within local expectations of moral seriousness. Pentecostal churches can also achieve such recognition, especially where they combine charismatic worship with durable social care and pastoral accountability. But when Pentecostalism is encountered primarily as spectacle or imported style, it becomes harder to translate into an idiom of trustworthy public presence. The burden of cultural translation is therefore heavier for Pentecostal communities, not because their theology is inherently less compatible with Kazakhstan, but because their public form is more vulnerable to narratives of excess and foreignness.

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The language of social cohesion should likewise be handled with care. Minority churches do not contribute to cohesion simply by existing, increasing their membership or providing charity. Charity may relieve immediate social need, but it does not automatically create trust if it is perceived as instrumental, missionary-oriented or culturally detached. Their contribution to cohesion becomes stronger when their activities generate bridging forms of social capital: relations that connect people across ethnic, linguistic, generational and religious boundaries rather than only reinforcing trust within the congregation itself. In this sense, social cohesion is relational and reciprocal. It depends not only on what Baptist and Pentecostal churches do, but also on how their actions are interpreted by neighbors, local authorities, relatives of converts and wider society.

For this reason, practices such as care for vulnerable families, support for people facing addiction or isolation, youth work, language localization and cooperation with local communities become socially significant only when they reduce symbolic distance. They help present minority churches as accountable local actors rather than as external religious projects. Conversely, even well-organized charitable activity may fail to support cohesion if it is associated with aggressive proselytism, cultural superiority or withdrawal from shared civic life. From this perspective, the most successful Protestant communities are those that combine theological conviction with public humility, legal transparency, cultural intelligibility and a willingness to be recognized as responsible neighbors. Such communities can strengthen social cohesion not by erasing religious difference, but by making difference socially manageable, ethically accountable and locally understandable.

Discussion

The comparison between Baptist and Pentecostal churches reveals two different strategies of religious presence in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. The Baptist mode is typically quieter, congregation-centered and ethically legible. It relies on disciplined communal life, service and gradual localization. Its vulnerabilities stem mainly from issues of registration, minority status and the lingering perception that Protestantism is foreign to Kazakh culture. The Pentecostal mode is more public, networked and affectively powerful. It is often better equipped for urban outreach and youth mobilization, but it is also more exposed to suspicion because it is easier to represent as culturally imported, commercially driven or emotionally manipulative (Baizhuma et al. 2025).

These differences should not be overstated. In practice, Baptist and Pentecostal communities overlap in important ways. Both depend on small-group life, both emphasize personal transformation, both have benefited from the post-Soviet opening of religious space and both are constrained by a regulatory regime that treats minority mission with caution. Both can contribute to local welfare and both can be stigmatized through the same language of ‘sects’ or ‘nontraditional movements’. The distinction lies less in theological essence than in public style and institutional form.

The broader implication is that religious freedom in Kazakhstan should not be measured only by the formal possibility of registration or by the number of legally recognized communities. A fuller measure must include whether minority groups can inhabit public life without disproportionate suspicion and whether the state’s regulatory framework allows genuinely plural forms of religious organization. The Baptist and Pentecostal cases show that rights, recognition and legitimacy are related but distinct. A church may be legal and still culturally suspect; it may be socially useful and still administratively vulnerable.

For theology and religious studies, the article also suggests the value of placing local ethical repertoires at the center of analysis. Too often, minority Christianity in Central Asia is discussed only in the language of globalization, security or rights. Those dimensions matter, but they do not exhaust the field. The long-term future of Protestant communities in Kazakhstan will also depend

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on whether they can enter the country's moral conversation in ways that are intelligible to their neighbors. The legacy of Khoja Ahmed Yasawi provides one vocabulary through which that conversation can be understood.

Conclusion

Baptist and Pentecostal churches in Kazakhstan are neither marginal curiosities nor straightforward success stories of missionary expansion. They are minority religious actors negotiating a post-Soviet environment in which secular governance, Muslim-majority cultural memory, transnational religious networks and local expectations of social responsibility intersect. This article has shown that their position cannot be explained only through the binary of religious freedom versus state control. Its main theoretical insight is that minority religious legitimacy depends on a mediating process of cultural intelligibility. In other words, formal legality does not automatically produce social acceptance, and public visibility does not necessarily produce trust. A religious community may be registered, institutionally active and socially useful, yet still remain culturally suspect if its language, practices and public style are interpreted as external to the national moral landscape.

This insight helps clarify the different public positions of Baptist and Pentecostal communities. Baptist churches appear, in the documentary and secondary literature examined here, to be more easily associated with modest congregational life, moral discipline, family ethics and service-oriented witness. Pentecostal churches, by contrast, often possess stronger urban visibility, youth appeal and transnational connectivity, but these same features can make their public presence more vulnerable to suspicion when charismatic worship or missionary networks are interpreted as culturally foreign. These distinctions should not be read as direct evidence of how Baptist or Pentecostal believers themselves understand their social role, since this article does not rely on interviews with church members, local communities or government officials. Rather, they are analytical conclusions drawn from legal frameworks, official statistics, religious-freedom reports and secondary scholarship.

The broader contribution of the article is therefore conceptual. It proposes cultural intelligibility as a useful category for studying minority religion in Muslim-majority but constitutionally secular societies. In the Kazakhstani case, this means asking not only whether Baptist and Pentecostal churches are legally permitted, but whether their public practices can be understood as locally responsible, morally accountable and socially non-antagonistic. Their contribution to social cohesion is strongest when religious difference is translated into forms of neighborliness, humility, care and civic responsibility that are recognizable within Kazakhstan's moral landscape. At the same time, the article's documentary design limits what can be claimed about lived congregational experience. Future research should therefore include interviews with Baptist and Pentecostal believers, ethnic Kazakh converts, mixed religious households, local officials and neighboring communities in order to test how cultural intelligibility is actually negotiated in everyday life.

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Conflict of interest statement

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