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Regulated pluralism and lived Christianity in Kazakhstan: Finnish parallels for analysing transcultural religious practice

Daniyar Aliyev (PhD student)
Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University, Almaty, Kazakhstan
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0004-3288-053X
Email: daniyar.alievv@mail.ru

Yerkin Massanov*
Nur-Mubarak Egyptian University of Islamic Culture, Almaty, Kazakhstan
PhD, Associate Professor
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0001-6908-771X
Email: yerkinmassanov@gmail.com

Zhomart Simtikov
Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University, Almaty, Kazakhstan
Doctor of Political Science, Acting Associate Professor
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0770-488X

Yerkebulan Yerzhanov
Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University, Almaty, Kazakhstan
PhD, Associate Professor
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3685-0376

Akaidar Kurmanbek
Abai Kazakh National Pedagogical University, Almaty, Kazakhstan
PhD, Associate Professor
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9274-731X
Email: kurmanbek.akaidar@mail.ru

Bekzhan D. Kossalbayev*
Department of Chemical and Biochemical Engineering, Institute of Geology and Oil-Gas Business Institute Named after K. Turyssov, Satbayev University, Almaty 050043, Kazakhstan
kossalbayev.bekzhan@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3892-7920

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Abstract

This article analyses Christianity in Kazakhstan as a transcultural and theologically meaningful social formation rather than as a mere demographic residue of Soviet history or a simple outcome of missionary expansion. The argument is that Christianity in Kazakhstan is produced at the intersection of three layers: legal regulation, ethno-linguistic negotiation, and lived religious practice. To make this argument, the study develops a comparative dialogue with Finland. Finland is not treated as a “model” to be copied, but as a contrasting mirror that clarifies how Christianity adapts under very different institutional conditions. In Kazakhstan, Christian communities function within a regime of regulated pluralism shaped by registration requirements, public sensitivities, and strong associations between religion and ethnicity. In Finland, by contrast, historically

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privileged churches operate in a secularised environment in which affiliation remains culturally important but practice is increasingly voluntary, negotiated, and family-based. Methodologically, the study is a comparative documentary analysis based on official statistics, legislation, and recent peer-reviewed scholarship on religious regulation, conversion, socialisation, and community belonging in both countries. The analysis shows that Christianity in Kazakhstan cannot be adequately understood through registration data or census categories alone. The largest Christian population is concentrated in historically Russian, Ukrainian, German, and Polish communities, yet small-scale Kazakh conversions, multilingual worship, digital mediation, and urban relational networks reveal an ongoing process of local translation. The article concludes that a strong account of Christianity in Kazakhstan requires theological attention to embodiment, belonging, witness, and contextual translation. It also argues that better public data, more consistent legal application, and greater pastoral investment in locally grounded forms of Christian community would improve both scholarly understanding and civic coexistence.

Keywords: Kazakhstan; Finland; transcultural Christianity; lived religion; religious regulation

Introduction

The study of Christianity in Kazakhstan often moves between two unsatisfactory extremes. In one approach, Christianity is treated mainly as a historical residue associated with Russian imperial settlement, Soviet demographic engineering, and the continued presence of Slavic and European minorities. In the other, it is discussed primarily through the language of foreign missions, legal restrictions, and conversion controversies. Both perspectives illuminate important parts of the picture, but neither adequately explains how Christian communities actually endure, adapt, and acquire meaning in everyday life. The central claim of this article is that Christianity in Kazakhstan is best understood as a transcultural formation: a faith tradition that is continuously translated into new social, linguistic, legal, and ritual settings.

This claim matters for both scholarship and theology. From a social-scientific perspective, Kazakhstan presents a striking case of regulated religious pluralism. According to official state data for the fourth quarter of 2024, the country had 3,999 registered religious associations, including 347 Orthodox, 91 Catholic, and 592 Protestant organisations, with 3,788 worship buildings in total and 452 registered missionaries. Yet the 2021 census recorded 3,297,550 Christians, or 17.19% of the population, of whom 3,269,143 identified as Orthodox, 18,988 as Catholic, and 9,419 as Protestant. The same census showed that only 45,649 ethnic Kazakhs identified as Christians. These figures immediately reveal a basic analytical problem: organisational density, demographic weight, and everyday religious practice do not map neatly onto one another. Protestant communities are numerous institutionally, yet small demographically; Orthodoxy is dominant statistically, yet uneven in ritual intensity; and minority conversion trajectories are socially significant even when numerically modest.

From a theological perspective, the case is equally important. Christianity is not only a system of doctrines or church structures. It is also a tradition of translation, embodiment, and communal belonging. Christian faith takes social form in language choice, patterns of worship, moral imagination, family transmission, and public witness. Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh each argued, in different ways, that Christianity is historically marked by its translatability into local vernaculars and cultural forms (Walls, 1996). That insight is especially useful in Kazakhstan, where Christianity exists across Russian-speaking Orthodox parishes, Catholic communities with distinct ethnic histories, small Protestant congregations, digital religious networks, and the more delicate experience of converts from Muslim-background Kazakh families. To study Christianity

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there only through legal documents or confessional labels is to miss the work of translation through which communities survive (Sanneh, 2009).

Finland provides a particularly helpful comparative mirror. It is almost the reverse of Kazakhstan in institutional terms. Finland is historically structured by the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Orthodox Church, both of which occupy a legally recognised position in public life. Yet Finland is also a highly secularised society in which formal membership outpaces regular participation and in which religious continuity increasingly depends on negotiated family socialisation, ritual selectivity, and voluntary belonging. In 2024, 62.2% of Finland's population belonged to the Evangelical Lutheran Church, 1.0% to an Orthodox church, and 34.9% to no religious community. Rather than comparing "more" and "less" religious societies in a simplistic sense, this article uses Finland to clarify how Christianity changes shape when it moves from inherited majority status toward negotiated cultural and communal presence. That comparison, I argue, sharpens our understanding of the opposite movement in Kazakhstan, where Christianity survives not as a national majority but as a historically layered, regulated, and locally adaptive minority tradition.

The article pursues three questions. First, what do official data reveal about the institutional and demographic structure of Christianity in Kazakhstan? Second, what kinds of local translation are visible in the areas of language, conversion, community belonging, and digital mediation? Third, what does the Finnish case contribute to a more theologically and sociologically adequate account of Christianity under minority conditions? The article's contribution lies in bringing together theological ideas of translation and contextualisation with sociological attention to regulation, ethnicity, and lived religion. In doing so, it argues that Christianity in Kazakhstan should be analysed neither as a fading residue nor as an imported anomaly, but as a negotiated religious presence shaped by both constraint and creativity.

Transcultural Christianity as an analytical framework

The term "transcultural Christianity" is used here in a precise sense. It does not simply mean cross-cultural contact, nor does it imply a smooth or harmonious blending of traditions. Rather, it refers to the way Christian faith takes form through repeated processes of translation across legal systems, languages, collective memories, ritual repertoires, and moral worlds. A theology journal is an especially suitable venue for such an argument because Christian theology itself contains strong conceptual resources for analysing this process.

One starting point is the long tradition of contextual theology. Bevans argues that Christian theology is never produced in a vacuum; it is always articulated in conversation with culture, social location, and historical experience (Bevans, 2002). This does not make Christianity relativistic. Instead, it means that the Gospel is received, interpreted, and embodied in specific contexts. A related insight appears in Walls's account of Christianity's "indigenising" and "pilgrim" principles (Walls, 1996): Christianity makes itself at home in local worlds even while also relativising every culture by calling it into a wider horizon of discipleship. Sanneh's work on translation sharpens the point further by showing that Christianity has historically expanded not merely through institutional power but through vernacularisation, the rendering of faith into local language and habit (Sanneh, 2009).

These theological insights are especially useful for Kazakhstan. The issue there is not whether Christianity is "foreign" in some abstract sense, but how Christian practice becomes intelligible and livable under conditions where religion is strongly tied to ethnicity, the public sphere is carefully regulated, and minority communities must balance visibility with prudence. In such

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settings, translation is not merely liturgical or linguistic. It is also relational, legal, and embodied. A congregation decides which language to preach in, how publicly to present itself, how to receive seekers from Muslim-background families, how to interpret social suspicion, and how to negotiate digital space. Theology, in this context, becomes inseparable from forms of community life.

A second conceptual pillar is lived religion. Ammerman insists that religion cannot be reduced to formal institutions or official doctrines (Ammerman, 2014). Much of religion happens in ordinary settings: in households, friendships, moral decisions, bodily habits, commemorations, and informal networks of meaning. This perspective is indispensable for analysing Christianity in Kazakhstan because official categories understate the extent to which belonging is embodied and relational. Census and registration data tell us who identifies with a tradition and which communities have legal standing, but they do not tell us how people pray, how often they participate, what language gives faith emotional depth, how families negotiate conversion, or why a small congregation can matter disproportionately in the life of a city neighbourhood (McGuire, 2008).

A third pillar concerns religion and media. Recent work in theology and religious studies has shown that digital media do not simply replace embodied religious community; rather, they reshape it unevenly. This is particularly relevant after the COVID-19 period, when online worship, messaging groups, and livestreamed services became normal across traditions. Yerekesheva's study of ritual life among Sunni Muslims and Russian Orthodox Christians in Kazakhstan showed that digital adaptation expanded communicative possibility without dissolving the need for embodied ritual. Recent Pharos Journal of Theology articles on social media and Christian mission likewise argue that digital communication can extend witness and community, but cannot fully replace physical fellowship and sacramental or congregational depth. This is an important theological point. Christian community is not merely informational; it is incarnational, relational, and often liturgical. Digital mediation can widen access, but it cannot by itself sustain the full ecclesial experience (Yerekesheva, 2022).

At the same time, translation should not be understood as an unlimited or frictionless process. Because Christianity also carries inherited doctrines, liturgical forms, and ecclesial authorities, attempts to make faith locally intelligible may create tensions between contextual adaptation and theological continuity. In Kazakhstan, such tensions may appear around language choice, worship style, ancestral customs, family expectations, and the boundary between cultural accommodation and syncretism. Translation is therefore both a condition of Christian survival and a site of discernment, where communities must negotiate which local forms deepen faithful embodiment and which may generate theological confusion or communal conflict. These tensions show that transcultural Christianity is not only a process of adaptation, but also a process of negotiation and sometimes contestation. Communities must respond to competing expectations from church tradition, local culture, family networks, and state regulation, and these expectations do not always align. Adaptation becomes contestation when local forms of expression are perceived either as insufficiently faithful to inherited Christian doctrine or as too disruptive to dominant ethnic and religious norms. In this sense, transcultural Christianity should be understood as a dynamic and sometimes fragile process in which intelligibility, fidelity, and social acceptance must be continually negotiated.

Methodology and sources

This article is based on comparative documentary analysis rather than new fieldwork. That design is appropriate for two reasons. First, the research question concerns the relationship between

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public regulation, demographic structure, and lived religious interpretation, which requires bringing together different kinds of data rather than relying on a single interview corpus. Second, the available official and scholarly material for both Kazakhstan and Finland is now rich enough to support a theoretically focused comparison.

The empirical base consists of four source groups. The first is official statistical and administrative data. For Kazakhstan, the analysis uses the 2021 national census collection on nationality, religion, and language proficiency, together with the state's published figures on registered religious associations, worship buildings, and missionaries for the fourth quarter of 2024. For Finland, the analysis uses Statistics Finland's 2025 compilation of population data and church-related figures released by Finnish institutions. These materials provide the baseline for comparing organisational presence, affiliation, and demographic composition (Statistics Finland, 2025).

The second source group is legal and policy material. For Kazakhstan, the 2011 Law on Religious Activity and Religious Associations is central because it defines the state's regulatory logic and the legal framework for registration, missionary work, and public religious activity. Recent scholarship by Podoprigora and Klyushev (Podoprigora and Klyushev, 2018), Brady, and Kusack helps situate this law within broader debates about religious freedom and governance. For Finland, historical and legal context is drawn primarily from Huhta's account of one hundred years of religious freedom, together with related literature on the special legal position of Finnish churches in a secular democracy (Huhta, 2022).

The third source group is recent peer-reviewed scholarship on Christianity, religiosity, conversion, and family socialisation. For Kazakhstan, this includes work by Peyrouse (Peyrouse, 2004), Ganje, Yerekesheva, Kaliyev and colleagues, and Zabirova and colleagues. For Finland, it includes research by Kupari, Toivanen and colleagues, Tervo-Niemelä and colleagues, and Toivonen and Lyhykäinen (Kupari, 2022). These studies were chosen because they speak directly to the themes of minority Christianity, ritual practice, religious transmission, and belonging (Kaliyev et al. 2023).

The fourth source group is selected theological scholarship on contextualisation, translation, and religious practice, especially Bevans, Walls, Sanneh, McGuire, and Ammerman. These works provide the conceptual vocabulary through which the comparative findings are interpreted (Sanneh, 2009).

The analysis proceeded in three stages. First, the Kazakhstan data were read synoptically to distinguish between demographic dominance, organisational distribution, and minority forms of Christian belonging. Second, the Finnish material was used as a contrastive case to examine how Christianity persists when cultural inheritance is stronger than regular practice. Third, the two cases were brought into dialogue through the three-level framework of regulation, translation, and lived community.

This design has limits. It does not capture parish-level microvariation in Kazakhstan with the granularity that ethnography could provide, and some of the Finnish literature is recent enough that its reception history is still limited. Nevertheless, the available evidence is sufficient to support a robust interpretive argument. The point is not to claim symmetry between the two countries, but to use comparison to reveal mechanisms that are easy to miss when each case is analysed in isolation.

Sources were included when they directly addressed Christianity, religious regulation, conversion, lived religion, family socialisation, or church-state relations in Kazakhstan or Finland, and when they were official statistical/legal documents or peer-reviewed scholarly works relevant to the

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article's comparative framework. Sources were excluded if they were primarily journalistic, polemical, insufficiently connected to the two case studies, or focused on Christianity in general without clear relevance to regulation, translation, or lived community. Where the literature presented contradictory findings, the article treated these differences as evidence of variation between institutional, demographic, and lived forms of religion, rather than forcing them into a single explanatory narrative.

Christianity in Kazakhstan: institutional structure and demographic asymmetry

Official data show clearly that Christianity retains a substantial institutional and demographic presence in Kazakhstan, but also that its internal structure is highly uneven. State figures for late 2024 recorded 347 Orthodox, 91 Catholic, and 592 Protestant religious associations, plus 302 Orthodox churches, 116 Catholic churches, and 421 Protestant worship buildings. These figures alone already caution against equating the number of organisations with social reach. Protestantism appears highly visible in institutional count, yet the census records a very small Protestant self-identifying population. This suggests organisational fragmentation, localised registration strategies, and a congregational ecology of many small communities rather than broad demographic weight.

These differences also mean that transcultural processes do not operate in the same way across Christian traditions. Orthodoxy in Kazakhstan is often mediated through inherited ethnic memory, especially Russian and Slavic cultural identity, so its adaptation is usually connected to historical continuity, ritual familiarity, and public recognition rather than active conversion. Catholic communities likewise carry strong ethnic and historical associations, particularly among Polish and German populations, although they may also function as small transnational and multilingual communities. Protestant churches, by contrast, are more closely associated with congregational networks, personal conversion, lay participation, and linguistic flexibility; therefore, their transcultural negotiation is often more visible at the level of individual biography and relational belonging. Conversion patterns are therefore not uniform: in Orthodox and Catholic contexts belonging may be shaped more by family history and ethnic inheritance, while in Protestant settings it is more often linked to personal decision, urban networks, crisis experience, friendship, and locally adapted forms of witness.

Ethnicity deepens the pattern. The census shows large Christian populations among Russians, Ukrainians, Germans, and Poles, and very small Christian identification among ethnic Kazakhs. Russians accounted for 2,550,270 Christians; Ukrainians for 303,439; Germans for 174,768; and Poles for 27,561. Among ethnic Kazakhs, 45,649 identified as Christians in total, including 42,444 Orthodox, 1,116 Catholic, and 2,089 Protestant. This does not make Kazakh Christianity statistically central, but it makes it analytically important. Those 45,649 persons represent precisely the site where transcultural translation becomes visible. They embody Christianity's movement across an ethno-religious boundary that many public narratives assume to be fixed.

This is where older and newer scholarship need to be read together. Peyrouse's classic work remains indispensable because it explains how Christianity in Central Asia became entangled with nationality, empire, and post-Soviet identity politics (Peyrouse, 2010). Ganje's chapter on Kazakhstan in *Christianity in South and Central Asia* likewise shows the historical layering that produced today's Christian mosaic (Ganje, 2019). Yet these accounts, by themselves, can make Christianity appear too static, too closely tied to inherited minority communities. Recent research complicates that picture. The fact that small-scale Kazakh Christian identification exists at all, and is repeatedly linked in recent studies to urban life, linguistic mediation, and relationship networks,

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means that Christianity in Kazakhstan is not only a memory of settlement history. It is also a contemporary process of selective local appropriation.

At the same time, it would be misleading to overstate fluidity. Kazakhstan's regulatory system still matters greatly. The 2011 law frames religion within a state-centred logic that combines formal guarantees of freedom of conscience with strong administrative oversight. Legal registration, scrutiny of religious materials, and regulation of missionary activity all shape the public ecology in which Christian groups operate. Podoprigora and Klyushev have shown that the practical meaning of religious freedom in Kazakhstan must be understood through both international legal norms and domestic implementation. Kusack likewise argues that the search for a more welcoming religious environment in "New Kazakhstan" remains incomplete. The point is not that Christian communities are simply suppressed. Rather, they inhabit a space of managed visibility. Some communities, especially historically rooted Orthodox institutions, can function with a degree of public normalisation. Smaller evangelical and Pentecostal groups often face a more delicate balance between lawful presence, reputational caution, and inward consolidation (Kusack, 2024).

This helps explain why the gap between numbers and lived significance is so pronounced. An Orthodox parish may be statistically large but unevenly active, linked to ethnic memory, life-cycle rites, and periodic ritual participation. A Protestant congregation may be tiny in census terms yet intensely formative in the lives of its members. A Catholic community may carry deep historical meaning for a particular ethnic group even if it is small in absolute numbers. The point, then, is not merely to describe Christian minorities but to distinguish institutional presence from lived intensity. Kazakhstan's Christian field is not flat; it is internally stratified by history, ethnicity, legal position, and congregational form.

Beyond statistics: language, conversion, and community

If registration and census data establish the institutional and demographic frame, they do not explain how Christian belonging is actually made durable. For that, recent studies of conversion and practice are essential. The most illuminating recent line of research concerns ethnic Kazakh converts and younger believers navigating post-Soviet religious pluralisation. Kaliyev and colleagues show that conversion among Kazakhs is rarely a purely instantaneous doctrinal event. It is usually embedded in biography, friendship, crisis, marriage, education, urban migration, and digitally mediated exposure to religious alternatives (Kaliyev et al. 2025). Their 2024 study collectively suggest that conversion is relational before it is programmatic. People enter communities through trust, care, and interpretive companionship, not only through abstract argument (Kaliyev et al. 2024).

This finding matters theologically because it reframes evangelisation and discipleship away from mere message transmission. In a context such as Kazakhstan, where family expectation and ethnic belonging are tightly connected, conversion often entails the reorganisation of one's social world. Christian community becomes meaningful not only because it teaches doctrine, but because it provides recognition, emotional safety, and a new moral vocabulary. It is, in effect, a mediating body. This is one reason small congregations can have outsized significance. They offer what state statistics cannot capture: dense belonging.

Language is central in this process. Much of the scholarship suggests that Russian has functioned as an important bridge language in Christian networks, especially in urban settings. This does not mean that Christianity in Kazakhstan is permanently locked into Russian-speaking forms. On the contrary, the theological pressure toward vernacularisation remains strong. If Christianity is indeed

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a translatable tradition, as Walls and Sanneh maintain, then the growth of genuinely local Christian forms depends on the availability of Kazakh-language scripture, preaching, testimony, pastoral care, and theological reflection (Walls, 1996). Translation here is not merely technical. It is existential. A faith expressed only in the language of inherited minority communities can remain socially peripheral to ethnic Kazakh life even when it is legally present. A faith that acquires credible local speech gains a different social possibility (Sanneh, 2009).

This does not imply an inevitable linear shift from Russian to Kazakh. Kazakhstan's urban Christian spaces are often multilingual, and multilingualism itself may be a stable form of local Christianity. What matters is that language choice is never neutral. It signals for whom a congregation is socially intelligible and where it imagines its future. In this sense, language is part of ecclesiology.

Digital mediation adds another layer. Yerekesheva's work on religious ritual during the pandemic demonstrated that both Sunni Muslim and Orthodox Christian communities in Kazakhstan adapted to altered spatial and communicative conditions, yet digital formats did not erase the importance of embodied gathering. That conclusion aligns with recent theological discussions of online mission and digital church community. Digital media can widen access, reduce distance, and sustain networks during crisis. They also help seekers explore faith quietly before any public affiliation. In a regulated environment, this matters. Online space can lower the threshold of initial contact for those who fear stigma or family conflict. At the same time, recent theological literature warns that digital participation does not fully substitute for sacramental, liturgical, or pastoral depth. This distinction is especially important in minority settings, where trust is often built through repeated face-to-face interaction.

Recent broader sociological work also suggests that post-atheist Kazakhstan cannot be understood through a simple revival narrative. Zabirova and colleagues describe a religious field marked by uneven religiosity, selective practice, and the complex afterlife of Soviet secularisation. That wider pattern should caution against overstating Christian exceptionalism. Christianity in Kazakhstan does not adapt in a vacuum. It does so within a society where religion more generally is being renegotiated between public visibility, personal searching, inherited forms, and state management (Zabirova et a., 2025).

Theologically, the practical outcome is clear. Christian communities in Kazakhstan endure where they become habitable: where they can translate faith into local speech, organise trust, offer interpretive meaning in times of crisis, and cultivate forms of belonging resilient enough to withstand pressure from both legal bureaucracy and social suspicion. This is what makes the notion of transcultural Christianity so valuable. It directs attention away from abstract questions of presence or absence and toward the actual social processes through which Christian life becomes possible (Tangirerung et al., 2025).

Finland as comparative mirror: heritage, secularisation, and voluntary belonging

Finland sharpens the Kazakhstan analysis precisely because the Finnish case has opposite starting conditions. Christianity in Finland is historically normalised rather than marginal. Yet that normalisation has not prevented significant secularisation. Statistics Finland's 2025 data show that by the end of 2024, 62.2% of the population belonged to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, 1.0% to Orthodox churches, 1.8% to other religious communities, and 34.9% to no religious community. The key point is not simply decline in church membership. It is the widening gap between inherited affiliation and active commitment.

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Huhta's account of one hundred years of religious freedom in Finland is especially useful here. It shows that Finnish religious life moved from strong Lutheran establishment toward a modern system of legal freedom and denominational plurality without entirely abandoning the public role of historically dominant churches. Finnish Christianity therefore occupies a hybrid position: institutionally recognised, culturally familiar, but increasingly dependent on voluntary engagement. This condition creates a very different ecology of Christian belonging from Kazakhstan's. Churches in Finland do not usually face the same pressures of registration anxiety or association with suspicious foreign influence. Their challenge is instead one of meaningfulness in a secular public culture.

This makes recent Finnish research on family socialisation and conversion especially valuable for comparison. Toivanen and colleagues argue that religious socialisation in Finnish families is increasingly shaped by agency, negotiation, safety, and authenticity rather than by straightforward inheritance. Tervo-Niemelä and colleagues (Toivanen et al., 2025) similarly show that continuity and discontinuity in family religion are produced through complex interactions between institutional tradition, parental practice, and the wider cultural environment. These findings are highly relevant beyond Finland. They suggest that even where churches are historically strong, Christianity now depends less on automatic reproduction and more on credible relational transmission (Tervo-Niemelä et al., 2025).

For Kazakhstan, this insight is clarifying. It suggests that the issue is not whether Christianity has majority or minority status, but how belonging is mediated. In Finland, Christianity survives where families, rituals, and communities make it existentially meaningful despite broader secular drift. In Kazakhstan, Christianity survives where communities do similar work under minority conditions and stronger external sensitivity. The social mechanisms differ in pressure, but not entirely in kind.

The Finnish Orthodox case is especially illuminating. Kupari's study (Kupari, 2022) of Finnish adult converts to Orthodoxy shows that ritual is not experienced merely as empty form or inherited obligation. For many converts, it provides structure, moral seriousness, aesthetic depth, and spiritual sincerity. Toivonen and Lyhykäinen likewise show that conversion within the Orthodox Church of Finland is strongly tied to community experience, participation, and belonging rather than mere doctrinal assent.

These findings resonate closely with the Kazakhstani literature on relational conversion. In both countries, Christian commitment deepens where community and ritual become convincing carriers of meaning. The difference is that in Finland the challenge is often secular indifference, whereas in Kazakhstan it may be social cost, legal caution, or ethnic incongruity.

The 2025 University of Eastern Finland report on confirmation practice adds one more instructive dimension. It notes that 73% of Finnish young people were confirmed in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in 2023. This figure indicates that ritual institutions can retain broad cultural traction even when broader belief and membership patterns change. In comparative terms, it demonstrates that Christian presence cannot be measured only by doctrinal commitment or formal affiliation. Ritual participation, family expectation, and cultural legitimacy also matter.

Kazakhstan shows the opposite asymmetry: some Christian communities may be organisationally present and spiritually intense while lacking broad cultural legitimacy. Finland shows how cultural legitimacy can persist even when institutional grip loosens. Reading the cases together reveals that Christianity survives through different combinations of law, memory, ritual, and community.

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Discussion: from administrative religion to embodied belonging

The comparison between Kazakhstan and Finland leads to a broader argument. Christianity should not be analysed only through the binary of majority versus minority, nor only through the classic secularisation narrative. What matters more is the relationship between administrative religion and embodied belonging.

Administrative religion refers to the forms through which states, census systems, and legal frameworks recognise, count, regulate, and classify religion. This level matters enormously. In Kazakhstan, it structures public possibility; in Finland, it still shapes the legal place of historic churches. But administrative religion is never the whole story. Embodied belonging refers to how communities become real in practice: through language, ritual, trust, family transmission, moral care, and networks of social recognition. It is entirely possible for a tradition to be administratively visible yet existentially thin, or demographically small yet spiritually dense.

Kazakhstan vividly displays this tension. Orthodoxy is numerically strong and historically rooted, but its internal intensity varies. Protestantism is organisationally numerous but demographically small, often operating through networks of high commitment. Catholicism may be numerically limited while retaining strong memory structures in particular ethnic communities. Kazakh converts remain few in census terms, but they are crucial indicators of Christianity's local translatability. To read this field well, one must move between levels of analysis without reducing one to the other.

Finland offers a mirror that confirms the point. There, Christianity retains legal recognition and cultural familiarity, yet it must increasingly persuade rather than presume. Family negotiation, ritual adaptation, and voluntary community participation become the real mechanisms of continuity. Thus the two countries, despite dramatic differences, both show that the future of Christianity depends less on institutional size alone than on the credibility of local forms of belonging.

This comparison also yields a more explicitly theological insight. Christianity's social durability depends on ecclesial embodiment. Churches persist where they are experienced as communities of translation: communities able to render faith intelligible in the language, anxieties, biographies, and moral worlds of concrete people. In Kazakhstan, this means multilingual ministry, careful pastoral accompaniment of converts, public wisdom under legal regulation, and forms of community that can sustain believers who cross social boundaries. In Finland, it means renewing the meaning of inherited rituals, supporting intergenerational transmission, and offering convincing communal depth in a secular setting.

The article therefore proposes a three-part interpretive model for contemporary Christianity in Kazakhstan. The first element is regulated presence: churches operate within a system of legal classification and public management that shapes visibility and strategy. The second is translational adaptation: Christian life becomes locally meaningful through language, social relationships, and contextual theological expression. The third is embodied community: faith is sustained where communities offer ritual depth, trust, recognition, and practical care. The Finnish comparison confirms that even where regulation is lighter and recognition stronger, the third element remains decisive (Figure 1).

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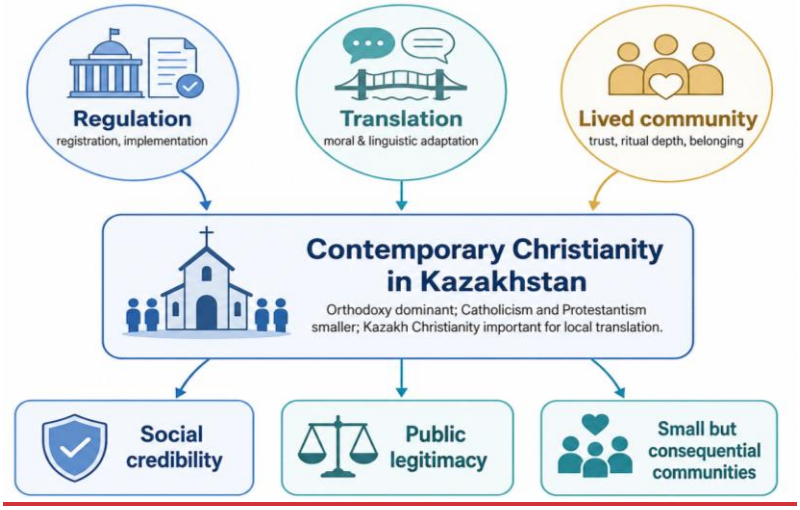

Figure 1. An interpretive model for contemporary Christianity in Kazakhstan

Policy and pastoral implications

Several implications follow from this analysis. The first concerns public data. Kazakhstan's official statistics are valuable, but they would be more analytically useful if state registration data, worship infrastructure, missionary figures, and census categories were published in a more integrated and longitudinal format. At present, researchers must infer too much about change over time from differently structured datasets. Better public metadata would improve both scholarship and policy.

The second concerns legal application. The issue is not merely the text of the 2011 law, but the consistency and predictability of its implementation. Minority Christian communities function more securely when legal expectations are clear, proportionate, and uniformly applied. A regime of ambiguous or uneven enforcement encourages self-censorship, insularity, and mistrust. If Kazakhstan seeks a genuinely stable model of civic pluralism, it will need not only formal guarantees but administratively even-handed practice.

The third implication is pastoral rather than legal. Christian communities themselves should invest more deeply in local translation. That means sustained work in Kazakh and Russian, contextually intelligent discipleship, strong support structures for converts and mixed-background families, and theologically serious reflection on digital ministry. Small communities under minority conditions cannot rely on numerical scale; they rely on depth, trust, and credibility. This requires pastoral formation as much as organisational expansion.

The fourth implication emerges from the Finnish comparison. Historically privileged churches do not remain meaningful by virtue of legacy alone. Finland shows that rituals, family socialisation, and voluntary participation become decisive in late modern conditions. Kazakhstan's Christian communities, though situated differently, face the same underlying challenge: they must make faith habitable, not merely visible. This is why theology, sociology, and policy need to be read together.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Christianity in Kazakhstan is best understood as a transcultural religious formation shaped by the interaction of regulation, translation, and lived community.

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Official data confirm that Christianity remains a significant part of Kazakhstan's religious landscape, yet they also reveal a pronounced asymmetry between organisational presence, demographic weight, and everyday practice. Orthodoxy dominates numerically, Catholicism and Protestantism occupy smaller but meaningful niches, and Kazakh Christian identification, though limited, represents an analytically crucial site of local translation.

The comparison with Finland clarifies the argument. Finland shows what Christianity looks like when legal recognition and cultural familiarity remain strong but active belonging becomes voluntary and negotiated. Kazakhstan shows the inverse dynamic: minority Christianity endures where communities translate faith into socially credible forms under conditions of greater regulation and stronger ethno-religious boundary-making. In both cases, the decisive issue is not mere institutional survival. The study is limited by its reliance on available official statistics and secondary interpretive materials, which cannot fully capture the everyday experiences, internal diversity, and informal practices of Christian communities in Kazakhstan.

It is whether Christianity can be embodied in communities of trust, ritual depth, and linguistic intelligibility. For theology, the central lesson is that Christianity's public and communal future depend on translatability. A church that cannot speak the moral and linguistic world of its context remains fragile, even if it is legally recognised. A church that can translate faith into local forms may remain small, but it can become deeply consequential. For the study of religion, the lesson is that administrative categories must always be supplemented by analysis of lived practice. For policy, the lesson is that religious equality requires not only formal registration systems but predictable and proportionate implementation.

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