**Al Farabi Kazakh National University**

**Faculty of Oriental Studies**

**International Conference**

**“Religious institutions and practices during the COVID pandemic:**

**challenges and answers”**

**On April 15, 2021**, an international online conference "Religious Institutions and Practices during the COVID Pandemic: challenges and answers" was held at the Faculty of Oriental Studies, al-Farabi Kazakh National University. The conference was organized within the framework of the project "Religious institutions and practices in the context of digitalization and changes in social space during the COVID pandemic in Kazakhstan" (ГФ МОН РК 2020-2021, ИРН AP08956706, project leader Dr. Laura Yerekesheva, Faculty of Oriental Studies, al-Farabi Kazakh National University).

**The purpose of the conference** was to examine the impact that the changes in the social environment and forms of social interaction caused by the global COVID-19 pandemic have on religious institutions and practices, both in the world and in Kazakhstan.

**Conference format:** During the conference, three sessions were held which discussed issues related to religious education and the practice of religious rituals during the pandemic.

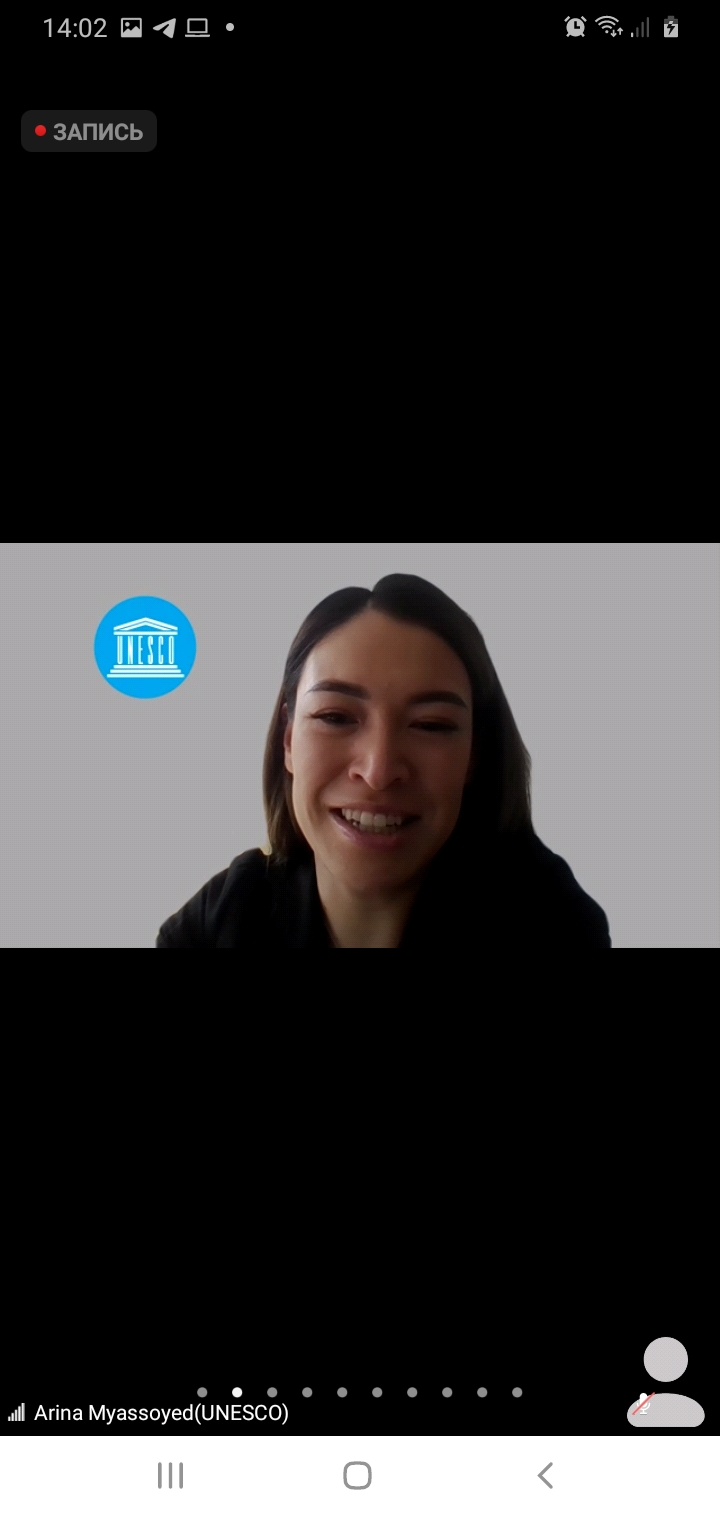
There was chosen the following format at the conference - three speakers for each session from among those who in one way or another contributed to the project as a participant in a group interview, in-depth interview, expert survey. They were followed by the commentaries representing the so-called “external” view, expressed by representatives of the religious, expert communities, UNESCO Chairs.

**The conference was attended by** Kazakhstani and foreign researchers, experts, teachers at religious and secular educational institutions, religious practitioners/believers, government officials, representatives of the UNESCO Cluster Office in Almaty and UNESCO Chairs from the UNITWIN / UNESCO Chairs network on intercultural and interreligious dialogue. In terms of country distributions, the participants represented Egypt, India, Kazakhstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkey.

**At the opening session of the conference**, the Dean of the Faculty of Oriental Studies of al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Dr. Yktiyar Paltore, made a welcome address to the participants (in Kazakh, Russian, and Arabic languages).



He congratulated everyone with the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan and appreciated the participants of the conference, representing different countries - Egypt, India, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Turkey. Dr. Y. Paltore emphasized that their participation indicated the importance of the conference theme, especially given the fact of the ongoing nature of the pandemic. He also expressed hope for overcoming the current difficulties and holding future scientific meetings in an offline format.

Arina Myassoyed, National Programme Officer, Social and Human Sciences at the UNESCO Almaty Cluster Office for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, in her welcoming speech noted the relevance of the conference topic, the importance of interreligious dialogue in UNESCO programs and activities at the global level, which is an important component of intercultural dialogue. She emphasized that during the pandemic, people witnessed the development of disinformation, hatred language in the online space, including in relation to religions and cultures. That is why the activities of religious and scientific leaders are important for dispelling myths, stereotypical thinking, and eliminating disinformation. She stressed that the art of dialogue is both a personal and social process, which involves developing skills, discussions, and raising awareness to understand the global and regional challenges caused by the pandemic, including among vulnerable groups.

****Dr. Laura Yerekesheva, leader of the research project within the framework of which the conference was held, introduced the main tasks, research methods and some of the results of the project. Among the research methods conducted (group interviews in focus groups, in-depth interviews, expert survey), she particularly focused on the results of an expert online survey conducted among researchers, academic, educational, expert communities, as well as the international network of UNESCO Chairs - UNITWIN / UNESCO Chairs “Intercultural Dialogue for Interreligious Understanding”. The answers of experts were analyzed through the prism of key research themes - religious education and religious rituals under the pandemics. She also highlighted the correlation in the answers of the experts representing Kazakhstan and so-called “near” neighborhood (Georgia, Russia, Tajikistan) and those from other countries who submitted their answers in English language (Australia, France, Germany, India, Turkey).

**Session 1** highlighted the themes of religious rituals and practices during a COVID pandemic, it was moderated by Laura Yerekesheva.

Muhammad al-Shahhat Abdulhamid Muhammad al-Jindi, Professor, Rector of the Egyptian University of Islamic Culture "Nur-Mubarak" in Almaty (Egypt), in his speech emphasized the global nature of the pandemic and the importance of addressing the issues discussed at the conference in general and for Muslims. He noted the position of the Ulema and Nur-Mubarak University. On the issue of religious rituals, the speaker highlighted that Islamic scholars and religious leaders call for relying on the Koran and the Sunnah as the primary sources of Islam, on the reason, since all authentic texts call for relying on reason and understanding the divine texts. As the speaker noted, Al-Azhar University has issued various *fatwas* regarding the rules for observing the 5 pillars of Islam (*tawhid, namaz, zakat, Ramadan, Hajj*), for example, the fatwa (dated March 30, 2020) on the possibility of performing *namaz* at home, on the number of pilgrims during the Hajj (1000 pilgrims at a time), which allowed to observe the distance and showed its effectiveness so far; on conducting *tarawih* with a distance of 2 meters. On the issue of religious education during the pandemic, the speaker noted that the entire year 2020 was held under the auspices of online education, although now the question of the possibility of offline education is being raised. In general, there is a need for mutual understanding between the religious and scientific communities, and, as the speaker stressed, between universal and Islamic values, such as charity and patience that could help in the fight against the pandemic.

****Priest John Livinsky, Vice-Rector for Educational Work of the Almaty Orthodox Theological Seminary (Kazakhstan), reviewed the specificities of the performance of religious services of the Russian Orthodox Church during the global COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine measures: restrictions or a complete ban on church visits by believers. He noted that the restrictive measures caused by the pandemic had an impact on all spheres of human life: everyday life, education, work, social relations, including the religious life of Orthodox Christians, forcing them to resort to new forms of worship and sacred rites. This also initiated a lively discussion within the Church on a wide range of issues related to this problem.

****Alisher Khalilov, director of the Publishing House "MIR", publisher of the Republican Islamic journal "IHSAN", theologian in Islamic studies, focused on the impact of the pandemic on the performance of religious rites and rituals by believers, the conduct of prayers. He noted that most of the duties of Muslims concerning the precepts in Islam (on 4 issues, except for one, *tawhid*, or the recognition of the deity of Allah alone) got restrictions. At the same time, he also stressed the change in the attitude of Muslim believers to restrictive measures – from skeptical in the first months of 2020 to concerned and serious, starting in the summer of 2020 (at the peak of the pandemic in Kazakhstan). In addition, as the speaker noted, there could be emphasized a certain revision of the attitude of the believers towards an implementation and timely performance of religious rituals, for example, the Hajj – it is not advisable to postpone what can be done today.

****Muzaffar Olimov, Doctor of Historical Sciences, Head of the Center for Regional and Comparative Studies at the Tajik National University (Tajikistan) focused on the specificities of the religious life of the Muslims in Tajikistan during the pandemic. In particular, he noted that, despite the restrictions since the spring of 2020, religious life has mostly continued, and after the end of the pandemic in the country was officially announced in January 2021, believers were allowed to visit mosques, however, subject to compliance with the mask regime and other restrictive measures. He also supported the opinion of Prof. al-Jindi who said that now the Muslims would be adjusted to combine the practice of religious rituals with restrictive measures. In conclusion, the speaker called for the need to study this theme in the context of each country, each religion. He also proposed for strengthening a cooperation and joint researches in the traditional (offline) format.

Gulchehra Seidova, Doctor of Historical Sciences, Head of the UNESCO Chair Branch at the Dagestan State University (Russia), spoke about the specificities of religious rituals in the context of the pandemic, using the example of the *muharram* celebration in Derbent, Dagestan in 2020. As she said, despite the difficult situation, it was decided to hold *muharram* (*shahsey-vahsey*) in full, with prayers, processions, theatrical mystery performances, and installations on the streets of the city. As the speaker noted, this was possible for a number of reasons – holding mass events in the open air, including in the courtyard (and not inside) of the *Juma* mosque, strict observance of social distance, using of sanitizers, measuring the temperature of each participant of the events. At the same time, as she highlighted there were not recorded any cases of coronavirus after the holiday. At the end, this experience has shown that it was possible to find a compromise on the performance of rituals in the context of a pandemic in each specific case.

**During Session 2** were discussed issues related to religious education during the COVID pandemic.

The session was moderated by Dmitry Spivak, Doctor of Philological Sciences, Prof., Head of the UNESCO Chair, Head of the Center for Fundamental Research in the Sphere of Culture at the D.S. Likhachev Russian Institute of Cultural and Natural Heritage (Russia). He noted the importance, relevance of the topic, the innovative and constructive nature of the research project, as well as the participation of representatives of the international network of UNESCO Chairs in this conference. The moderator emphasized the importance of the notion on "generational catastrophe" during an online education, as mentioned by the priest P. Bakhtiyarov in his presentation. That was correlated with the ideas of the recently published book by Harvard researchers "Educational Collapse". D. Spivak emphasized that, according to research data, about 500 million students in the world were practically excluded from the educational process during the pandemic, and 2/3 of the curricula required a revision. All this testifies to the importance of the educational sphere and the need to study this issue for the development of countries.

Priest Petr Bakhtiyarov, Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs of the Almaty Orthodox Theological Seminary (Kazakhstan), in his speech noted the global nature of the challenges faced by the educational system in the world, including religious education. He emphasized that, similarly to the secular education system, religious educational institutions have a different level of organization of the educational process, a different degree of integration of the distant learning technologies into the educational process. Equally important is that some of the religious educational programs are difficult to perform online, distantly; while the links between the organization of the religious educational process and the spiritual and moral development of students is also worthwhile mentioning. The speaker emphasized that in the course of the global process of transformation of the educational sphere during the pandemic, theological educational institutions face the same problems and tasks as the secular education system. Therefore, it is only necessary to work out a set of long-term solutions, not only to contain the blow of the pandemic, but also to learn the lessons, and take necessary and important steps forward.

****Samat Mambetaliev, a teacher at the Abu Hanifa College Madrasah (Kazakhstan), noted the specificities of Islamic education in the country during a pandemic, using the example of educational work at the Abu Hanifa College. In 2020, the madrasah college switched to online education, the transition period took about a week. The speaker highlighted both the positive results and challenges of distant learning, stressing the importance of human interaction while teaching religious disciplines, as prayer requires practical learning in addition to theory. Among the positive aspects of online learning, the speaker noted the need for knowledge, the ability to use resources, books online; development of students' independent work skills; saving time and resources. Among the negative aspects - insufficient level of control; lack of communication and direct contact with friends, teachers, "lived" experience; weakness or even absence of the Internet, learning technical support in remote areas of the country. The speaker also noted the need to use both formats in the future - offline and online.

****Aibek Babatay, Head of the Department of the Center for Research in the Field of Religions of Almaty region (Kazakhstan), focused on the experience of the state agency working with religious organizations during the pandemic. The speaker noted that the priority areas of the Department's work are monitoring and analyzing the religious situation, the activities of the established religious associations, organizing and conducting events to strengthen interfaith harmony and stability. As the speaker noted, the specificity of the Almaty region is the poly-confessional composition of the population, a large number of religious organizations and associations (644) and religious confessions (12), while throughout Kazakhstan the number of religious confessions reaches (18). Along with inter-confessional, dialogue between the state and confessions and society is also important. The speaker highlighted the importance of working on the Internet in the context of a pandemic, including due to the increase in destructive content and the growth of its consumers.

 Suat Beylur, PhD, Deputy Director, Institute of Eurasian Studies at the H. A. Yasavi International Kazakh-Turkish University (Turkey), noted that the issues of religion were studied in the context of social and societal approaches by various scientists such as R. Otto (experience of the sacred), P. Berger (sacred canopy), others. According to the speaker, religious experience is primarily a social experience, not an individual one. The speaker focused on some results of a sociological survey conducted by him in 2016 (with a sample of 600 students from Almaty, Nur-Sultan, Turkestan) in which particularly there were the following answers about the sources of information about religion - the family, theological institutions, the Internet, social networks.

The speaker suggested the following steps for the development of religious education in the context of the pandemic: online education needs to be further developed, there is need to identify the age categories of those receiving online education, to form educational content on a religious theme, to create various educational platforms, to provide free access to materials for religious education.

Ainura Kurmanalieva, Doctor of Philosophy, Professor, Head of the Department, Faculty of Philosophy, Political Science, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (Kazakhstan) noted the consequences of the pandemic on the research and educational space. There are many predictions about the fate of universities, about the creation of a different online reality. There are pros and cons of online education. MOOCs, academies, and various training courses are being created, while the main thing should remain which is the quality of educational programs, instilling human values in students. The speaker particularly focused on religious extremism, which was evolving during the pandemic, changing the methods of work, using a remote format, in which recruiters do not need to be in one country. This is facilitated by the increase in social isolation and time spent online, including by children, and the rise of misinformation on the Internet. According to the speaker, the methods of work of terrorists and extremists on the Internet include inciting inter-religious hatred, various forms (cartoons, stories, parables, direct requests for donations, including fake ones, etc). As she mentioned, it is necessary to increase the level of religious education and religious studies literacy, to highlight the family values, to develop a strategy for fighting extremism online.

****Priyankar Upadhyay, Professor, UNESCO Chair, Banaras Hindu University (India); Research Fellow, Oslo Peace Research Institute, noted the timeliness and importance of studying the conference theme and organizing this type of conferences. The speaker noted that great challenges are taking place in the academic discourse – even 20 years ago it was not possible to study this topic at all. Previously, religion was viewed primarily through dividing lines. Today, religious education is an extremely important topic that has a great "nuclear" potential and a great impact. Proper religious education can change social relations for the better. The pandemic is a symptom of the civilizational failure that humanity has found itself in many areas, including education. The speaker stressed that today the world is facing the consequences of "secular myopia" – underestimation of the potential of religious education. At the same time, according to the speaker, it is necessary to combine science and education, religion, interreligious ideas should be introduced into the pedagogy; there is also need to pay attention to spiritual development, inclusion, and the development of human capital in education.

**During the "Questions and Answers" session**, the importance of studying the topic of religious extremism in the context of the pandemic, especially among young people was emphasized. This topic should be raised at special conferences, fora, meetings in online or offline format (Priest Petr Bakhtiyarov, Ainura Kurmanalieva).

The possibility of introducing religious studies education in secular schools, particularly in India, was discussed, and the issues of gradual and careful implementation of this format in schools were also discussed (Laura Yerekesheva, Priyankar Upadhyay)

The need for studying the religious rituals in a social context, which is still not fully available during the pandemic, was also highlighted (Munzifa Babajanova, Gulchehra Seyidova).

The participants of the conference supported further discussions, meetings, and joint research. At the conference conclusion, the organizers called for submission of paper-based articles to the Faculty of Oriental Studies journal - "Bulletin of KazNU. Oriental Studies Series".

