



STRUCTURAL AND PRACTICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RELIGIOUS ACTIVITY OF EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN BAPTISTS IN KAZAKHSTAN

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Abstract. This article examines the religious activity of Evangelical Christian Baptist communities in Kazakhstan from structural and practical perspectives. The distinctiveness of the study lies in its comprehensive approach, which goes beyond historical or legal analysis to include community-based practices, religious rituals, missionary strategies, and processes of adaptation within the national and cultural environment. The study explores the internal pluralism of the evangelical Christian Baptist movement by comparing Alexandrian, classical, and Pentecostal Baptist congregations and analyzing their theological orientations, organizational models, and patterns of interaction with the state. The article systematizes field empirical data on contemporary Baptist religious practices in Kazakhstan and the analysis of the transition of missionary activity from traditional formats to digital platforms. The authors identify the role of the baptismal ceremony, the practice of witnessing, as well as programs for youth and children in the formation of community identity and the preservation of religious continuity. In addition, special attention is paid to the adaptation strategies of ethnic Kazakh converts living in an Islamic-dominated environment, highlighting the importance of peaceful coexistence and intra-community support. The research results contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the development of Protestant communities in Kazakhstan and provide an analytical framework for analyzing religious diversity and interfaith interaction. Overall, the article offers new scientific insights into how evangelical Christian-Baptist communities reconcile religious identity, social boundaries, and institutional constraints within modern Kazakhstani society.

Keywords: Kazakhstan; Evangelical Christian Baptists; Protestant communities; religious activity; missionary strategies; religious practice; national-cultural adaptation; religious pluralism.

For citation: Mamyrbayev, D., Onggar, E., Kaliyeva, Y., & Karatyshkanova, K (2026). Structural and practical characteristics of the religious activity of Evangelical Christian Baptists in Kazakhstan. *Jete – Journal of Philosophy, Religious and Cultural Studies*, 155(2), 120-129. <https://doi.org/10.32523/3080-1281-2026-155-2-120-129>

ҚАЗАҚСТАНДАҒЫ ЕВАНГЕЛШІЛ ХРИСТИАН-БАПТИСТЕРДІҢ ДІНИ ҚЫЗМЕТІНІҢ ҚҰРЫЛЫМДЫҚ ЖӘНЕ ТӘЖІРИБЕЛІК ЕРЕКШЕЛІКТЕРІ

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СТРУКТУРНЫЕ И ПРАКТИЧЕСКИЕ ОСОБЕННОСТИ РЕЛИГИОЗНОЙ ДЕЯТЕЛЬНОСТИ ЕВАНГЕЛЬСКИХ ХРИСТИАН-БАПТИСТОВ В КАЗАХСТАНЕ

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Аңдатпа: Бұл мақала Қазақстандағы евангелшіл христиан-баптистер қауымдарының діни қызметін құрылымдық және тәжірибелік тұрғыдан қарастырады. Зерттеудің ерекшелігі – мәселені тек тарихи немесе құқықтық шеңберде шектемей, қауымшілік тәжірибелерді, діни ритуалдарды, миссионерлік стратегияларды және ұлттық-мәдени ортаға бейімделу үдерістерін кешенді түрде талдауында. Жұмыста александриялық, классикалық және елуінші баптистер қауымдарын салыстыру арқылы евангелшіл христиан-баптистер қозғалысындағы ішкі плюрализм айқындалып, олардың теологиялық бағдарлары, ұйымдастырушылық модельдері және мемлекетпен өзара әрекеттесу үлгілері талданады. Зерттеудің ғылыми жаңалығы Қазақстандағы қазіргі баптистік діни тәжірибелерге қатысты далалық эмпирикалық деректерді жүйелеу және миссионерлік қызметтің дәстүрлі форматтардан цифрлық платформаларға ауысу үдерісін талдау болып табылады. Авторлар шомылдыру рәсімінің, куәлік айту тәжірибесінің, сондай-ақ жастар мен балаларға арналған бағдарламалардың қауымдық бірегейлікті қалыптастырудағы және діни сабақтастықты сақтаудағы рөлін анықтайды. Сонымен қатар, ислам басым ортада өмір сүретін этникалық қазақ дінін қабылдаушылардың бейімделу стратегияларына ерекше назар аударылып, бейбіт қатар өмір сүру мен қауымшілік қолдаудың маңызы көрсетіледі. Зерттеу нәтижелері Қазақстандағы протестанттық қауымдардың даму динамикасын тереңірек түсінуге ықпал етіп, діни әртүрлілік пен конфессияаралық өзара әрекеттесуді талдауға арналған аналитикалық негіз ұсынады. Жалпы алғанда, мақала қазіргі

Аннотация: В данной статье рассматривается религиозная деятельность общин евангельских христиан-баптистов в Казахстане со структурной и практической точек зрения. Отличительной особенностью исследования является комплексный подход, который выходит за рамки исключительно исторического или правового анализа и включает изучение внутриобщинных практик, религиозных ритуалов, миссионерских стратегий, а также процессов адаптации в национально-культурной среде. В работе выявляется внутренний плюрализм евангельского христиан-баптистского движения на основе сопоставления александрийских, классических и пятидесятнических баптистских общин с акцентом на их теологических ориентациях, организационных моделях и формах взаимодействия с государством. Научная новизна исследования заключается в систематизации эмпирических полевых данных о современных баптистских религиозных практиках в Казахстане и в анализе трансформации миссионерской деятельности от традиционных форм к цифровым платформам. Авторы определяют роль крещения, практик свидетельствования, а также программ для молодежи и детей в формировании общинной идентичности и поддержании религиозной преемственности. Особое внимание уделяется адаптационным стратегиям этнических казахов, принявших христианство, в условиях преимущественно мусульманского окружения с акцентом на мирное сосуществование и внутриобщинную поддержку. Полученные результаты способствуют более глубокому пониманию динамики развития протестантских общин в Казахстане и формируют аналитическую основу

қазақстандық қоғам жағдайында евангелшіл христиан-баптистер қауымдарының діни бірегейлікті, әлеуметтік шекараларды және институционалдық шектеулерді қалай үйлестіретіні жөнінде тың ғылыми пайымдар ұсынады.

Түйін сөздер: Қазақстан; евангелшіл христиан-баптистер; протестанттық қауымдар; діни қызмет; миссионерлік стратегиялар; діни тәжірибе; ұлттық-мәдени бейімделу; діни плюрализм.

для интерпретации религиозного многообразия и конфессионального взаимодействия. В целом статья предлагает оригинальные научные выводы о механизмах, посредством которых общины баптистов выстраивают религиозную идентичность, социальные границы и взаимодействие с институциональными ограничениями в условиях современного казахстанского общества.

Ключевые слова: Казахстан; евангельские христиане-баптисты; протестантские общины; религиозная деятельность; миссионерские стратегии; религиозная практика; национально-культурная адаптация; религиозный плюрализм.

Дәйексөз үшін:

Мамырбаев, Д., Онгар, Е., Калиева, Е., Каратышканова К. (2026). Қазақстандағы Евангелшіл христиан-баптистердің діни қызметінің құрылымдық және тәжірибелік ерекшеліктері. *Jete – Journal of Philosophy, Religious and Cultural Studies*, 155(2), 120-129 <https://doi.org/10.32523/3080-1281-2026-155-2-120-129>

Для цитирования:

Мамырбаев, Д., Онгар, Е., Калиева, Е., Каратышканова, К. (2026). Структурные и практические особенности религиозной деятельности евангельских христиан-баптистов в Казахстане. *Jete – Journal of Philosophy, Religious and Cultural Studies*, 155(2), 120-129 <https://doi.org/10.32523/3080-1281-2026-155-2-120-129>

Introduction

The territory of Kazakhstan was subject to the Russification and Christianization policies of the Russian Empire from the eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries; however, these policies were not fully implemented. Following the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917, the missionary activity of Protestant movements, including Evangelical Christian Baptists (ECB), intensified in the region. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Baptists emerged in Western Siberia, Northern Kazakhstan, and the Altai region together with German peasants who migrated from Ukraine and the Volga region within the framework of Stolypin's agrarian reform (Department for Religious Affairs of the City of Almaty <https://religionmap.kz/kz/subconfession/1597>).

According to the researcher V. Dik, the missionary influence of Baptists in Kazakh society was, in some cases, more significant than that of the Orthodox mission (Dik, 2009: 46). The arrival of Baptists in the territory of Kazakhstan dates back to 1890, when they came from the Caucasus via the Trans-Caspian route, while their systematic missionary activity began in 1903 in the settlement of Nikolaevka in the Kostanay district (Dik, 2003: 115). A report of the Orthodox Missionary Society's "Turkestan Diocesan Committee" from 1916 indicates that a Baptist community and church were operating in the city of Verny (present-day Almaty) (15). Furthermore, issue no. 13 of the Turkestan Diocesan Gazette, published in 1917, reported that the number of Baptists in Central Asia was approximately 2,000 individuals (16).

Baptists date the beginning of their activity in Kazakhstan to 1908; accordingly, the centenary of Baptist activity in the country was commemorated in 2008 (Borbasova, 2009: 30). At present, the history of this movement in Kazakhstan spans approximately 117 years. During the Soviet period (1917-1991), the principal obstacle to Baptist missionary activity was the state policy of atheism. Following Kazakhstan's independence in 1991, a process of religious revival began, and Baptist communities resumed their activities through official registration.

Currently, there are 196 legally registered Evangelical Christian Baptist religious associations in Kazakhstan (Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan). Nevertheless, some communities have refused registration due to the requirements of the Law "On Religious Activity and Religious Associations." In 2015 and 2017, members of unregistered communities in several cities were subjected to administrative liability for illegal religious activity (Glushkova, 2015; 2017). For example, in 2015, 69 court cases were initiated in the city of Arkalyk, Kostanay Region, for the distribution of religious literature in violation of legal regulations (Glushkova, 2015). In 2017, Evangelical Christian Baptist communities in the cities of Temirtau, Oral, and Taraz were fined for holding worship services illegally during the Easter period (Glushkova, 2017). According to community members, unregistered communities do not pose a threat to the state; however, their belief in the supremacy of divine law over state

law and legal restrictions confining missionary activity to the territory of the community hinder their registration (Glushkova, 2017).

Although the number of studies devoted to religious processes in the post-Soviet space has increased, there remains a shortage of empirical research on Christianity in Kazakhstan, particularly on the religious experience of ethnic Kazakhs who have converted from Islam to Christianity. Although the Islamic revival in Central Asia has been widely studied, the Christian revival and the activities of Christian communities in Muslim society have not been sufficiently studied. In this context, there is a need for a systematic scientific study of baptism as a post-Orthodox Christian direction.

The study is aimed at analyzing the historical development and current religious situation of the Evangelical Baptist community in Kazakhstan. As empirical material, Sunday services of Kazakh communities that adopted Christianity in Almaty were observed, and interviews with pastors were conducted. The researcher, as a participant and observer, conducts the analysis and, based on the results obtained, identifies the features of the religious activity of the Evangelical Baptist communities in Kazakhstan.

Relevance of the problem: The religious situation in independent Kazakhstan is characterized by a multi-confessional structure, gradual changes in legal regulation, and discussions about the place of non-traditional religious directions in society. In this context, the study of the religious activity of Evangelical Baptist Christians, which is a branch of Protestant Christianity, is scientifically relevant. Especially in the face of legislative restrictions, the changing service models of congregations, their transition to online missionary work, and their adaptation to the national and cultural environment are becoming an important subject of research (Glushkova, 2017).

Issues related to Baptism and Protestant movements in the post-Soviet space have been examined from various perspectives in the works of Filippov (1973), Burdo (2003), Collins (1989), Grenz (2002), Fee (1985), Smagulov (2011), and Glushkova (2017). The history of Baptism and missionary activity in Kazakhstan has been addressed in the studies of Borbasova (2009; 2017), Dik (2003), Murzaraimov (2018), and Sagyndykov (2015). However, comprehensive empirical analyses of the contemporary activities of Evangelical Christian Baptist communities, including their internal and external structures, remain insufficient.

The object of the study is the religious activity of Evangelical Christian Baptist communities in the Republic of Kazakhstan.

The subject of the study comprises the structural, ritual, theological, and missionary characteristics of Evangelical Christian Baptist communities in Kazakhstan, as well as the mechanisms of their adaptation to the national, cultural, and legal environment.

The aim of the study is to analyze the contemporary religious activity of Evangelical Christian Baptists in Kazakhstan on the basis of empirical materials, in order to identify their structural-organizational, ritual, and theological characteristics and to describe their models of operation within a predominantly Muslim society.

Materials and Methods

The study is based on a qualitative research methodology. Data collection employed internal (participant) and external observation, semi-structured interviews, as well as source-based and content analysis methods. These approaches made it possible to examine the religious activity of Evangelical Christian Baptists (ECB) from both internal (theological-philosophical) and external (structural-ritual) perspectives in a comprehensive manner.

Field research was conducted in Evangelical Christian Baptist congregations in Almaty for six months starting in September 2024. The research included participation in Sunday services, observation of regular congregation activities, and interviews with pastors, deacons, and congregation members. The researcher took the position of both participant and observer, studying the religious experience of the congregation in a natural setting. Ethical norms were observed in the research process, prior consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality of the information obtained was ensured.

The EBA congregation in Kazakhstan has several directions that have formed over historical periods. During the research, three main directions within Baptists were identified: classical Baptists, Pentecostal Baptists, and Alexandrian Baptists.

Classical Baptists are a direction that has developed in the USA and Western countries, while in the case of Kazakhstan, they are known as traditional Evangelical Baptists and often serve in close-knit, relatively closed communities.

Pentecostal Baptists are characterized by a special emphasis on the influence of the Holy Spirit, immersion in the Spirit, glossolalia (speaking in tongues), and charismatic worship practices.

Alexandrian Baptists are characterized as a traditional and missionary-active congregation that is in harmony with the Eastern Christian worldview. This direction was chosen as the main focus of the study because field research is available in Kazakhstan and the congregation has consented to participate.

The lack of a centralized management structure of Baptist congregations and the independent functioning of each congregation made it possible to collect specific empirical data and identify intra-community features during the study. Congregational staff provided conditions for open monitoring of the research process.

The research strategy was initially developed in accordance with the research questions. The following keywords were used in the selection of literature: "missionary", "Christianity", "baptism", "Central Asia", "Baptism in Kazakhstan". The analysis included scientific articles published between 2002 and 2024 that were directly related to the research topic. Materials from various publishing platforms and electronic databases, including Google Scholar and Scopus, were reviewed. As a result of the search, 10 scholarly articles corresponding to the research objectives were selected.

In addition, content analysis was conducted on missionary and testimonial materials published on the social media platforms of Evangelical Christian Baptist communities. Specifically, 51 testimonies describing individual conversion experiences and 3 missionary-oriented podcasts were analyzed ("Zhol Shyndyk Omir"). Furthermore, the registration dynamics of ECB communities were examined comparatively across different years, and patterns of faith-based classification and historical chronology were systematized.

The collected empirical data were analyzed using descriptive, comparative, and classification methods. These approaches enabled the systematization of both internal (theological-philosophical) and external (structural-ritual) characteristics of the communities and provided a comprehensive portrayal of Evangelical Christian Baptist religious activity in the context of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Annual distribution of legally registered Evangelical Christian Baptist organizations in the Republic of Kazakhstan.

Table 1

Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan

Denominations	2011	2022	2023	2024
Evangelical Christian Baptist	364	195	186	196

During the analysis of the collected empirical materials, descriptive, comparative, and classification methods were employed. These approaches made it possible to systematize both the internal (theological-philosophical) and external (structural-ritual) characteristics of the communities, as well as to provide a comprehensive description of the religious activity of Evangelical Christian Baptists in the context of Kazakhstan.

Literature Review

The study analyzed domestic and foreign scientific works that consider the theological foundations of baptism, the historical development of the Protestant movement, and the features of missionary activity in the post-Soviet space. These studies served as a basis for a theoretical explanation of the religious activity of Evangelical Christian Baptists and the interpretation of empirical data. While Filippov (1973) describes the doctrinal and ritual features of baptism through the concepts of baptism, faith, and salvation, Collins (1989) analyzes the symbolic and dogmatic elements of the Baptist belief system. Grenz (2002) focuses on the place of baptism in the Protestant worldview, the relationship between the church and power, and the relationship between faith and the political structure. Fee (1985) extensively examines the role of the Holy Spirit in Baptist theology and its influence on the religious experience of believers.

The activities of Protestant communities in the post-Soviet space are addressed in the works of Smagulov (2011) and Glushkova (2017), which analyze the legal status of religious associations in Kazakhstan and Central Asia, restrictions on missionary activity, and the processes by which communities adapt to state policy. These studies help clarify the impact of legislation regulating religious activity and religious associations on the functioning of Evangelical Christian Baptist communities.

Issues related to the formation of Baptism and missionary activity in Kazakhstan are covered in the studies of Borbasova (2009; 2017), Dik (2003), Murzaraimov (2018), and Sagyndykov (2015). These authors describe the stages of the arrival of Baptists in Kazakhstan, the limitations imposed during the Soviet period, and the processes of revival during the years of independence. In addition, these works partially address the adaptation of Baptism to the national and cultural environment.

Nevertheless, the reviewed literature does not provide a sufficiently systematized empirical analysis of the contemporary religious activity of Evangelical Christian Baptists, including its structural-ritual and theological-philosophical dimensions, nor does it adequately examine their modes of operation in a predominantly Muslim society. In particular, the religious experiences of ethnic Kazakhs who have converted from Islam to Christianity, their social adaptation within communities, and the formation of new religious identities are rarely treated as distinct research subjects.

In this regard, the present study seeks to supplement existing scholarship by offering a comprehensive analysis of the religious activity of Evangelical Christian Baptist communities in Kazakhstan based on fieldwork data.

Results and Discussion. The conducted empirical study showed that the religious activity of evangelical Christian Baptist communities in Kazakhstan is not homogeneous, but rather diverse in terms of internal orientations and principles. During the study, it was found that there are significant differences between the views of the Alexandrian, classical, and Pentecostal Baptists within the IEB regarding the state, law, and missionary work. The results of the empirical observation showed that the Alexandrian Baptists are not against legal registration, but rather, they glorify statehood and social stability as religious values. Congregation meetings start and end with a prayer for the country's peace and the leaders' well-being. The peace of the state is also reflected as one of the main themes in the weekly prayer sheets distributed to congregation members.

It was also found that the reason for some congregations not being registered was more due to legal restrictions (less than 50 people) than to their religious beliefs. In general, the majority of the IYC congregations in Kazakhstan are legally registered and operating. These data indicate that biased opinions about unregistered congregations need to be scientifically reviewed.

Among classical Baptists, the principle of separation of faith and state power prevails. During the interview, one of the respondents noted: "God created both the congregation and the state, but their directions do not coincide with each other." This position is consistent with Albert Henry Newman's conclusions about the independence of the Baptist congregation (Grenz, 2002: 7). However, this independence does not mean complete isolation; the congregation can establish relations with other churches and public institutions on the basis of mutual interest (Afolaranmi, 2022: 5).

The research data was looked at. It was found out that there are about 10,000 to 15,000 people in Kazakhstan who believe in BDS. This number was calculated by multiplying the minimum group size of more than 50 people by the 196 groups identified. We do not know how many people are part of groups that are not officially registered.

We also know that there are 6 missionaries who are officially allowed to work in the country, as stated by Glushkova in 2017.

The results of the observation in Almaty showed differences in the buildings of Baptist congregations by ethnic composition. Churches where Kazakh, Uyghur and Tajik congregations meet are mostly located in ordinary residential buildings and are not equipped with security or video surveillance. Churches where Russian, Korean, and German congregations meet, on the other hand, have security and parking systems due to the large number of believers and their proximity to the city center.

The research revealed that baptism is a central religious practice in BDS congregations. According to the members of the community, baptism is a sign of spiritual rebirth, a person repenting of his past life through faith (Smagulov, 2011: 50). As Collins (1989: 29) notes, this ceremony is interpreted as a symbolic act of spiritual cleansing, not a washing away of sins.

Differences were also observed in the age requirements for baptism. While the Classical and Pentecostal Baptists allowed adolescents aged 14–18 to participate in the baptism ceremony, the Alexandrian Baptists do not support the baptism of those under 18.

The order of the ceremony usually consists of the following stages:

- repentance;
- prayer;
- confession (declaration of faith in the Trinity);
- baptism by full immersion under the leadership of the pastor.

After baptism, acceptance into membership in the congregation does not occur immediately; the pastor monitors the stability of the candidate's faith, and only then does he or she receive full membership.

Sunday services are central to the religious life of the EAC congregations and last about three hours. The service consists of several parts: common prayer, songs of praise to God, the pastor's sermon, and congregational singing. During the sermon, texts of the Holy Scriptures are read together with the congregation and explained using simple life examples. A special feature is that women are also allowed to participate in preaching.

Guitars, dombra, drums, and choirs are used as musical accompaniment. These elements enhance the emotional perception of the sermon and strengthen believers' sense of identity. Community services are held in Kazakh and Russian, and a special "Songbook" for Kazakh believers is used.

Testimony has emerged as an important religious practice in the IYC community. It is carried out during Sunday services or at an informal table after the service, as well as on social networks. Testimonies tell about the experience of believers overcoming difficulties in their lives (illness, psychological stress, social crisis) through faith and community support.

Children and youth form an important part of community life. Religious values are taught through educational and playful elements in special rooms for children. And young people gather on Fridays, discuss Bible topics, and organize festive and charitable events. This practice serves as a mechanism for ensuring intergenerational continuity within the community.

The ICB congregations have adapted to internet missionary work as a result of governmental restrictions that limit conventional missionary practices, such as distributing material on the street or from house to house. According to the survey, the congregations placed a high value on sharing their testimonies, preaching, and sharing their members' life stories on social media, YouTube, and websites.

This approach is emerging as a new form of missionary work. The results of the study showed that the religious work of Evangelical Christian Baptists in Kazakhstan is a complex system formed by the influence of historical tradition and the current socio-legal situation. The internal diversity of congregations, differences in theological positions, and changes in missionary strategies determine the dynamic development of Baptists in Kazakhstan.

Conclusion and Implications. The conducted study reveals that the religious practice of Evangelical Christian Baptists (ECB) in Kazakhstan constitutes a complex and multilayered phenomenon whose internal dynamics are reflected through historical, theological, and social lenses. The history of ECB community development is inseparable from the migrant waves at the beginning of the twentieth century; despite the harsh atheistic policies in the Soviet period, these communities were maintained and, after the years of independence, they continued to evolve by adapting to the new circumstances. Empirical data suggest that ECB communities in Kazakhstan are quite diverse. Alexandrian, classical, and Pentecostal Baptists in these communities differ in a number of ways, such as their relations with the state, their attitudes towards legal registration, and their strategies for their mission work.

While Alexandrian Baptists support and consider legal registration as a priority, classical Baptists are firm in their principle of complete separation of faith and state authorities. The phenomenon of internal pluralism of Baptism in Kazakhstan is mediated by this situation, which serves as proof that its evolution is not limited to one single model only. The results of the research indicate that baptism is a very important element in the church life of ECB communities. It is understood as being tightly connected with confession, faith, and the new life in the Spirit, and is regarded as one of the chief requirements for becoming a member of the community. However, different communities have different views on age-related matters, which in turn show the diversity of theological interpretations of Baptism.»

The order of worship, the habit of sharing testimonies, and involvement with youth and children act as systematic tools that help to consolidate a community's internal identity. Specifically, the testimony sharing tradition deepens

the individual's personal faith among the congregation, being also a powerful tool of missionary work. Commitments to youth and children were recognized as one of the main elements that lead to the community's lasting stability.

Due to legislative restrictions, the missionary activity of ECB communities has been forced to change traditional formats towards the online sphere. Missionary work implemented via social networks, video platforms, and digital content has taken the forefront of modern-day ECB activities. This change points to the communities' capability in forming new communication strategies when faced with external pressure.

The situation of the Kazakh ethnic believers is very interesting, especially when we take into account that they live in a mostly Muslim environment. It is a known fact that religious conversion often comes out of a personal life crisis or the person has at least some psychological stress or social problems. While the new religious identity is being formed in certain cases, the person has to endure some social pressure. There are, nevertheless, some positive ones within the community who think that such believers should be given support, have a peaceful adaptation, and avoid open conflict with society.

The study reveals that the religious activity of Evangelical Christian Baptist (ECB) communities in Kazakhstan has been fluctuating mainly through trying to accommodate the national, cultural, and legal environment. ECB communities are described as groups of believers who put a special focus on discipline, unity in the fellowship, as well as spiritual transformation of the individual believer. On a local scale, the area of their activities constitutes one of the tangible expressions of religious pluralism in Kazakhstan.

The research findings indicate the need for further interdisciplinary studies aimed at a deeper analysis of the psychological, philosophical, and social adaptation processes of ethnic Kazakhs who have converted from Islam to Christianity. Research in this area may provide a scientific basis for a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of religious change in Kazakhstan and for strengthening interreligious tolerance.

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Conflict of Interest. The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest related to this study.

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Мақала туралы ақпарат / Информация о статье / Information about the article.

Редакцияға түсті / Поступила в редакцию / Entered the editorial office: 13.04.2026

Рецензенттер мақұлдаған / Одобрено рецензентами / Approved by reviewers: 10.06.2026

Жариялауға қабылданды / Принята к публикации / Accepted for publication: 30.06.2026