

A Critical Review of

The Dissertation work by Nursulu Sauranbekkizi Altaeva, “The Mormon Church: A Religious Study” (“Мормондар қауымдастығы: дінтанулық талдау” prepared in order to obtain the degree of ‘doctor’ (PhD) within the field of Religious Studies [6D020600 – Дінтану]).

1) The Novelty of the Dissertation and Its Relation to General Scholarly and Governmental Programs

As Kazakhstan moves further and further from its subjection to the Tsarist and Soviet empires into the period of its own sovereign independence, it continues to chart its own course within the contours of an ever-shifting framework of international relations. Its choice – in contrast to neighboring Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan – to pursue a democratic, secular path has opened the door to new foreign influences – politically, economically, culturally, linguistically and religiously. Among the many new foreign groups promoting new religious options over the past 30 years are ‘the Mormons’, more formally known as ‘The Church of Jesus Christ Latter-Day Saints.’

While popular surveys of Mormon history and global missions have been produced in Russian and English, with some limited overviews in Kazakh, often (translated) as part of a survey of multiple religious traditions, no concentrated, thorough study, particularly in the Kazakh language, of their beliefs, practices, organization and outreach efforts has yet been undertaken in direct relation to their work within Kazakhstan. The dissertation work of Nursulu Sauranbekkizi Altaeva titled “The Mormon Church: A Religious Study” (“Мормондар қауымдастығы: дінтанулық талдау” [6D020600 – Дінтану]) is (one of) the first to fill this gap.

Altaeva places her study in relation to Kazakhstan’s 1992 law “On Freedom of Religion and Religious Associations” and 2011 law “Regarding Religious Activities and Religious Assemblies.” These provide the main conduits and guidelines through which the Mormon church has come to and worked to establish itself in the Kazakh nation. Along with (in section one) a careful study of the rise, development and spread of Mormon beliefs and practices in social and cultural perspective and (in section two) an in-depth analysis of the Mormon church’s current organizational structure, purpose(s) and missionary programs in global perspective, Altaeva (in section three) unmasks the spread and current standing of the Mormons in Kazakhstan, their missionary, humanitarian and educational aims and, finally, their social impact within their congregation in Almaty.

Altaeva’s dissertation work makes an important contribution to the Kazakhstan government’s ‘Ruhani zhangiru’ (‘Spiritual Awakening’) program as well as the (former) ‘Madenii mura’ (‘Cultural Heritage’) program. It also provides essential material for religious studies and other related courses, seminars, study programs, etc., within the Kazakh educational system.

2) The Requisite Scholarly Findings

The dissertation was arranged in three main sections, each divided into three chapters, framed by an introduction and conclusion. In accordance with her research purposes, Altaeva arrived at a number of important findings:

In the first scholarly finding, she clarifies the complexity and versatility of Mormon beliefs and practices.

In the second scholarly finding, she explains the enigma of the founder, Joseph Smith, including his main idiosyncrasies and strategies.

In the third scholarly finding, she situates the Mormon church between traditional mainstream Protestantism and aberrant sects.

In the fourth scholarly finding, she elucidates the historical success of the Mormon church in relation to its intentional efforts to portray itself in 'Americanist' terms.

In the fifth scholarly finding, she locates the vitality of the Mormon church in its organizational skills and economic policies.

In the sixth scholarly finding, she shows how Mormons shape a positive image of themselves in the world through humanitarian, outreach and other related efforts.

In the seventh scholarly finding, she analyzes how Mormon missionaries 'culturally contextualize' their activities.

3) The Scholarly Basis and Achievement of the Main Findings, Summaries and Conclusions of the Researcher within the Dissertation

In the first concluding point ('tuzhirim'), the dissertant successfully demonstrates the complexity and versatility of Mormon beliefs and practices in historical perspective, unearthing archaic occult-magical elements alongside the Mormon church's Protestant-style orientation.

In the second concluding point ('tuzhirim'), the dissertant sufficiently establishes how the founder of the Church, Joseph Smith, promoted himself as a religious reformer who restored the distorted early true teachings of early Christianity while also allegedly abiding by the traditions of what Christians traditionally call 'the Old Testament' (i.e., the Hebrew-Jewish Bible).

In the third concluding point ('tuzhirim'), the dissertant successfully shows how the Mormon church should be understood as transcending the boundaries of traditional European Protestantism. She does so by identifying signs of a distinct sect, particularly belief in the sinlessness of its own founders and living prophets combined with elements of spiritual elitism and modern-day commercialized forms of religious marketing.

In the fourth concluding point ('tuzhirim'), the dissertant satisfactorily demonstrates how the church's founder, Joseph Smith, and his successor Brigham Young, both skillfully wove the church's doctrine together with the political ideology of the United States, thereby contributing to the eventual success of Mormonism in the U.S., in spite of its initial persecution and flight west. The proclamation of the United States by the Mormons as a new Zion, a global center for the spiritual salvation of mankind, coincided with the ideology of America, which cast itself in messianic terms as an 'elect' nation (cf. 'American exceptionalism').

In the fifth concluding point ('tuzhirim'), the dissertant sufficiently establishes that the vitality of the Mormon church is in the building of a well-organized management system closely tied to its economic policies and business ventures as well as world missionary efforts. It organized public life in business-like fashion to become an attractive marketing model at both individual and broader social levels.

In the sixth concluding point ('tuzhirim'), the dissertant skillfully and successfully shows how the Mormon emphasis on charity, education, upbringing, and the promotion of healthy lifestyles and family values are the main means through which they shape a positive image of themselves in the world.

In the seventh and final concluding point ('tuzhirim'), the dissertant convincingly demonstrates how Mormon missionaries 'culturally contextualize' their activities by crafting their message and methods to build on and contribute to the customs and traditions of their target (cf. 'host') countries as much as possible. Thus together with standard educational seminars, informal gatherings, social assistance and support, and English language courses, they celebrate Nauryz, organize competitions of national musical instruments, etc., within the Kazakh cultural context specifically.

4) The Level of Contribution of the Scholarly Findings and Conclusions

The first scholarly result which is new for the field of religious studies in Kazakhstan is as follows: The first Mormon missionaries came to Kazakhstan in 1997 as workers for the United States embassy. They thus used their political ties and privileges to help establish the church's missionary outreach in the country and make it successful.

The second scholarly result which is new for the field of religious studies in Kazakhstan is as follows: The predominant part of the Mormon church in Kazakhstan has been clarified as consisting of the Russian ethnic group with a minority of Kazakhs and other ethnic groups also participating.

The third scholarly result which is new for the field of religious studies in Kazakhstan is as follows: The teaching of English and organization of activities highlighting American life have been shown to appeal to and impact Kazakhstani citizens in their choice to attend and join the Mormon church in Kazakhstan.

The fourth scholarly result which is new for the field of religious studies in Kazakhstan is as follows: The Mormon church in Kazakhstan publishes various literature and employs various social activities often tailored to Kazakh cultural practices and published or conducted in the Kazakh language. This includes capping off various events and activities with a banquet ('dastarkhan') in order to provide prospective members with the opportunity to interact and exchange ideas with current members (serving as missionaries) and thus meet the social and psychological needs of those prospective members.

The fifth scholarly result which is new for the field of religious studies in Kazakhstan is as follows: Between 1997 and the present, the total number of members in the Almaty church has grown to 230, with growth between 2018 and the present increasing from 197 to 230. While this increase is relatively small within the larger population of Almaty and the rest of the country, it reflects noticeable growth and indicates the effectiveness of the various outreach programs (noted above).

5) The Theoretical and Practical Significance of the Study

In the course of carrying out her research work, the achievements of the dissertant Nursulu Sauranbekkizi Altaeva are noteworthy and impressive. As (one of) the first to treat the Mormon church (otherwise known as The Church of Jesus Christ Latter-Day Saints), her work makes a valuable contribution to the religious scholarship of the nation. She offers a thorough analysis of the historical rise, spread, beliefs, practices, organizational structure, missionary aims and methods and impact within Kazakhstan, viewed in global historical perspective.

She employs a wide array of scholarly theories and methodologies, including: synchronous and diachronic, phenomenological and systemic structural analysis, historical and logical methods of cross and content analysis as well as sociological methods (inclusive observation, interviews) which took into consideration the contingent, gender, age, and socio-ethnic composition of the believers.

She basis her work on a wealth of primary and secondary sources from recognized scholars, popular internet and published works, made available in Russian, English and Kazakh.

Her study has relevance for not only the field of religious studies, but historical, cultural, sociological, ethnological, linguistic, economic, and other related fields, including their courses, texts, programs of study, and more.

6) Weaknesses and Recommendations for Improvement

My first recommendation for improvement is that the dissertant demonstrate more clearly and precisely which "occult, magical elements and archaic pagan views" were mixed together in the Mormon faith and historically how and where they came from.

My second recommendation for improvement is that the dissertant employ greater use of primary sources, particularly the Book of Mormon itself.

My third recommendation for improvement is that the dissertant include a brief analysis of Mormon-Muslim relations within the history of Mormon missionary work among other Muslim peoples in the Middle East and Asia. This would provide important comparative material for evaluating Mormon work in Kazakhstan.

My fourth recommendation for improvement is that the dissertant offer a deeper investigation into the relation and compatibility of Mormon and Kazakh Islamic social values and practices.

My fifth recommendation for improvement is that the dissertant pursue a comparative study of Joseph Smith as founder of Mormonism with Mohammad as founder of Islam. A number of studies along these lines have been pursued in English and other European languages. Such a study would be of interest and importance within Muslim Kazakhstan. Legitimate and fruitful points of comparison can be made within an authentically religious studies framework without following the predominantly negative, derogatory approaches of Western scholars in pursuing such a study.

My sixth recommendation for improvement is that the dissertant also pursue comparative study of the doctrinal basis and practices of polygamy in both Mormonism and Islam as well as the debates which both Mormons and Muslims have had with Western Christian theologians and missionaries over this issue. Here again legitimate and fruitful points of comparison can be made within an authentically religious studies framework without following the predominantly negative, derogatory approaches of Western (Christian) scholars.

7) The Correspondence (Saikestigi) of the Contents of the Dissertation to the Requirements of the Degree to be Granted

The dissertation work of Nursulu Sauranbekkizi Altaeva is valuable and impressive. Her theoretical and methodological basis is sound. She has achieved her overall aims with accuracy, clarity and effectiveness. She makes an important contribution to the field of religious studies in Kazakhstan.

Her dissertation, "The Mormon Church: A Religious Study" ("Мормондар қауымдастығы: дінтанулық талдау," has been prepared in accordance with the requirements of the Republic of Kazakhstan's Ministry of Education.

In accordance with my critical review of her work as detailed above, I herein count her worthy to obtain the degree of 'doctor' (PhD) within the field of Religious Studies [6D020600 – Дінтану]).

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