



I Started to Think Differently

Answering the Call for Actionable Solutions with Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy

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At a 2018 roundtable in Washington, D.C., hosted by Kazakhstan's embassy, a high-ranking government official from Kazakhstan articulated the need for cross-cultural religious literacy, especially among government officials. He emphasized the challenges faced by the regional governments and law enforcement personnel within Kazakhstan, who were raised and educated during the Soviet era and who often view religious groups with suspicion and apprehension. He explained, "Our officers sometimes act out of ignorance rather than intent. As a result of this ignorance, Western organizations frequently report instances of religious persecution." He continued, "We urgently need international expertise to educate both our public officials and communities about religious diversity." This candid admission marked a pivotal moment. LYNC soon thereafter launched a multi-year initiative fostering a cross-cultural religious literacy that builds social cohesion through inclusion thus strengthening religious freedom by lowering social hostility toward religious minorities.

Acknowledging The Impact of Long-Held Stereotypes

As Kazakhstan continues to forge its national identity and develop a supportive legal framework, it faces significant challenges. Long-standing Soviet stereotypes and the threat of extremist recruitment from both within and beyond its borders exert substantial pressure on its progress. Notably, the last time the country experienced a significant incident of terrorist attack was in 2016, marking the culmination of an escalating trend in previous years. In response, in the name of national security, stringent laws and their rigorous enforcement across regions effectively curtailed violent extremism in the short term.

While these strict legal measures achieved short-term stability, they did not address the need for a sustainable strategy to ensure long-term social cohesion and national security. Recognizing this gap, Kazakhstan now seeks assistance from the international community, requesting expertise in combating extremism and funding for initiatives that enable a long-term strategy rooted in educational efforts that foster enduring positive changes in civil society regarding how citizens understand and engage one another.

Challenges

In Kazakhstan, especially in the government sector, particularly among those over the age of 40, there still exists a Soviet-era sentiment that views religion as a tool for manipulation and control, reflecting deep-rooted suspicion toward 'the other.' This perspective is not isolated but widely held, influenced by a history of an oppressive Soviet government where the inclusion of any dissent is a weakness, an existential threat. For example, if a minority religious group in Kazakhstan hold steadfast to the belief that



their specific doctrine is the only 'correct' path to Heaven, the Soviet mindset instinctively understands this group as a threat. Ironically, minority religious groups can exercise the same mentality. Some minority religions perceive other religious practices not just as different but as threats to society. This combination of top-down and bottom-up mindsets that tend to see threats everywhere significantly hinders efforts toward social cohesion. In fact, this combination fosters division rather than a mutually respectful understanding among the diverse religious communities that is good for social cohesion and stability.

Addressing the deeply ingrained stereotypes prevalent in both governmental and religious circles while upholding the rule of law necessitates a sophisticated, soft power approach. This strategy must transcend conventional methods of promoting religious freedom, aiming to foster a broader understanding and acceptance across different sectors. This approach is essential for breaking down barriers and facilitating a more inclusive environment that supports diverse religious expressions.

This approach aligns with the "builders" strategy described in the Dr. Chris Seiple's article "Advocates and builders, advancing religious freedom together,"¹ which encourages an inside-out method of engagement. According to Seiple, there are generally two approaches to advancing religious freedom: advocating and building. Advocacy in the realm of religious freedom often operates from an outside-in perspective, drawing global attention to violations and pushing governments towards compliance with international norms. Advocates are crucial in raising awareness and offering hope to those persecuted, but their approach can sometimes simplify complex issues, alienate foreign governments, and hinder sustainable change. Conversely, builders frame religious freedom as essential for national well-being, aligning it with local interests in security, business, and social harmony. This method, deeply rooted in understanding local contexts and cultures, aims for sustainable, long-term change by aligning reforms with local values and interests. Such an approach, however, requires patience and persistent relational diplomacy. While effective, "builders must be cautious not to compromise their integrity for access, as doing so can inadvertently support repressive regimes."

Some organizations that use relational diplomacy to advance religious freedom often convene roundtable discussions with religious and government leaders in the hope of developing recommendations to reform religious law. Unfortunately, these efforts frequently face significant challenges. Often, the presence of religious leaders at such events doesn't translate into meaningful participation or impact. Discussions tend to be insular, with religious groups and government officials sticking to familiar conversations among themselves. For example, religious leaders frequently focus solely on their faith community concerns, showing little willingness to support or collaborate with other religious groups or to unite around a shared cause of religious freedom. Additionally, there's a notable lack of essential knowledge among these leaders to effectively suggest legal reforms or to engage constructively with the legislative body. In fact, religious leaders need to be equipped to engage governments just as government officials need to be equipped to engage religious leaders.

Recognizing these challenges, LYNC, taking a "builders" approach, has innovated traditional models by fostering cross-cultural religious literacy initiatives. This approach emphasizes breaking down the barriers of misunderstanding and building multi-faith and multi-sectoral bridges in Central Asia, spearheaded by

¹ <https://religionnews.com/2023/01/25/advocates-and-builders-advancing-religious-freedom-together/>



efforts in Kazakhstan. This strategic shift addresses immediate issues and lays the groundwork for sustained change and deeper societal cohesion, fostering a “covenantal pluralism”.² That deepens and expands social cohesion through inclusion. Critical to this approach is teaching “cross-cultural religious literacy.”³

Developing Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy Curriculum

Launched by LYNC in Kazakhstan in March 2022, the multi-city cross-cultural religious literacy training program was developed by Wade Kusack, who was born in the Soviet Union. The program was designed with a deep understanding of the post-Soviet context and was founded on three tenets:

1. Understanding Oneself in the Context of Once Religion.
 - What does my theology teach me about treating people outside of my religion/worldview?
2. Understanding the Other
 - What does a religion of the ‘other’ teach about how she or he should treat me?
3. To Cooperate, Not Just Tolerate
 - How can we cooperate?⁴

The first meeting was unprecedented in three ways. This initial training marked the first time in Kazakh history a training program on religion had been held involving local law enforcement agencies, religious communities, and international organizations. This was the first time the government, an international NGO, and a local civil society organization partnered to deliver a religious freedom certificate training on religious literacy. Finally, for the first time, a local Muslim imam and Christian pastor co-moderated each session of the certificate course, serving as an ideal model for constructive engagement and relationship-building that could be replicated in other regions of the country and beyond. One Kazakh prosecutor said of the program, “This is a very interesting approach—to share different case studies from around the world instead of telling us what to do. I would like to see how a broader religious literacy program could work in our country.”⁵

Building on this progress, in January of 2023, LYNC signed a new MOU with Caspian University located in Almaty, Kazakhstan, aimed at deepening the impact of its programs. The MOU seeks to develop a curriculum and syllabus for an advanced training program in cross-cultural religious literacy, primarily targeted toward government employees and law enforcement officials involved in religious affairs. To address the unique challenges of post-Soviet developments in the religious field, LYNC is partnering with

² “Covenantal pluralism” is a robust, relational, and non-relativistic paradigm for living together, peacefully and productively, in the context of deep differences. Please see “Toward a Global Covenant of Peaceable Neighborhood: Introducing the Philosophy of Covenantal Pluralism,”

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15570274.2020.1835029?src=recsys>

³ Please see “A Case for Cross-Cultural Religious Literacy” for more detail:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15570274.2021.1874165>.”

⁴ Embedded within these tenets are what Chris Seiple and Dennis Hoover (2021) define as a set of skills (evaluation, negotiation, and communication) rooted in a set of competencies (in understanding oneself, understanding the religious “other,” and understanding the context of potential collaboration).

⁵ As noted to one of the LYNC experts during the event.



Pepperdine University's Straus Institute for Dispute Resolutions in the development of the training. This partnership represents an important step forward in advancing religious freedom through the promotion of mutual understanding and cooperation among individuals of different faiths and sectors of society.

Result: Realizing the Fruit of Reconciliation Top-Down and Bottom-Up

The CCRL activities spearheaded by LYNC in Kazakhstan have yielded significant and recognizable outcomes in enhancing religious freedom and improving relations between religious communities and government authorities. This success is acknowledged in the U.S. State Department's 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom concerning Kazakhstan, which underscores LYNC's pivotal role in fostering these improvements.

The report specifically notes that representatives from various religious organizations observed improved relations with government officials, marking a decline in harassment and an increase in direct engagements compared to previous years.⁶ This shift illustrates a substantial change in the government's approach towards religious groups, signaling a move towards more open and constructive interactions.

Following the training in Shymkent, LYNC Founder and CEO Wade Kusack visited the city once again to meet with government officials. The new head of religious affairs invited Kusack to dinner, mentioning he had only been in office three weeks. While discussing incidents related to religious expression, Kusack brought up the case of an evangelical pastor. "Oh I realize why he is behaving like that! This is a behavior complex of a small person," said the official. He understood a core principle: The "other" was not evil. Rather, this pastor simply did not feel equal or welcome in the surroundings of his contemporaries. The solution to decrease local tension? Within three weeks of meeting with LYNC and hearing the tenets of CCRL, the official ensured the pastor had an opportunity to speak and experience the encouragement and applause of the local imams. Through exposure to a new thought process, this official demonstrated how rapid transformation on the implementation level can take place.

Firmly invested in Kazakh civil society across the years, LYNC has witnessed firsthand the transformation in local religious communities. In 2017, at one of the LYNC hosted events, the imam of the largest mosque in Shymkent came to Kusack and said, "What you are saying is essential to my community. And I am writing it down. I like the work you do." Over the next five years, this imam faithfully attended every LYNC event, often chasing trainers with questions. In 2023, he flew to Georgia for a LYNC-hosted roundtable event and again made sure to connect with Kusack during a break. Reaching for his telephone, he showed a video shared by his parishioners. The video showed a Muslim teacher and his disciple in a garden full of different flowers. The teacher led his disciple to a corner filled with many different flowers. The disciple commented on the multiplicity of colors and their beauty, to which the teacher replied: "Allah created different religions and different viewpoints to make the world more colorful." This important teaching moment, crafted to communicate five years of messaging and ideas shared at conferences, roundtables and trainings, showed the grassroots impact of multi-year CCRL investment. As he put his phone back in his pocket, the imam said, "I started to think differently."

⁶ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/kazakhstan/#:~:text=Representatives%20of%20some,attending%20these%20events>



The successful results of the CCRL training highlight how mutual respect and understanding create both a bottom-up and top-down positive impact, with transformation demonstrated in multiple regions and with multiple groups. After LYNC’s briefing titled “Building Religious Freedom in Central Asia”⁷ that took place on January 29 at the Army and Navy Club in Washington DC, Kazakhstan’s embassy twitted: “Pioneering contributions of Kazakhstan and collaborative efforts of LYN Community established a fruitful dialogue on promoting religious freedom in the region.”⁸

“Understanding precedes empathy, and empathy precedes any lasting social shift toward peace. LYNC’s long-term investment into Kazakhstan had a clear aim to support the government in its quest and desire for social cohesion, preserving its cultural and religious identities while advancing its society in the modern world. Only through an educational approach could the dialogues between religious groups and government have any hope of progress,” says Wade Kusack, Founder and CEO of LYNC. “LYNC and its partners had the distinct privilege of walking alongside Kazakhstan’s forward-thinking leaders across spheres as they adopted new ways of thinking. Their change of thought has organically permeated into their communities, offices and places of worship, moving from the mind to the heart as their understanding transformed to empathy. Looking forward, these frontrunners will receive further training to teach the principles of cross-cultural religious literacy and be vital voices in the international religious freedom community.”

⁷ <https://lyncommunity.org/news-article/lync-hosts-briefing-on-building-religious-freedom-in-central-asia-unveils-new-approach-in-metrics-reporting/>

⁸ https://twitter.com/KazakhEmbassy/status/1752518638714724448?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw