



“Бүгін ежелгі қазақ жері зор мәртебеге ие болды – ол әлемдік және дәстүрлі діндердің лидерлері мен жоғары өкілдерін жер шарының түкпір-түкпірінен өркениеттер мен діндер арасындағы үнқатысуға шақырып отыр”.

**Қазақстан Республикасы Президенті
Нұрсұлтан Назарбаев**

“Сегодня древняя казахская земля удостоена великой чести – она приглашает лидеров и высоких представителей мировых и традиционных религий со всех концов земного шара для проведения диалога между цивилизациями и религиями”.

**Президент Республики Казахстан
Нурсултан Назарбаев**

“The ancient land of Kazakhstan is honoured to welcome leaders and high representatives of world and traditional religions of the world for a dialogue of civilisations and religions”.

**President of the Republic of Kazakhstan
Nursultan Nazarbayev**





The Blessed Dialogue

These were unforgettable minutes. Eighteen snow-white yurts, ancient dwelling places of Kazakh nomads, were pitched up at the Tree of Life, and in each of them prayers to the Lord were offered in many languages. Truly, it is difficult to translate the symbolism of this act that joined the voices of Muslims and Jews, Catholics and Hinduists, Orthodox and Shintoists, Protestants and Buddhists, Krishnaites and Taoists... All this symbolised a joint address of the human mind to the Supreme Mind.

The closing of the First Congress of World and Traditional Religions in Astana took place in the shadow of the Baiterek Monument, which symbolises the mighty Tree of Life and embodies hopes for peace and eternal victory of the light over the dark, of the good over the evil. It was here that the pastors of the largest faiths offered prayer to God begging the Almighty to send welfare for each and everybody.

During the forum, from 23 through 24 September 2003, the eternal truths were sounded in different languages by different religious leaders.

"All human existence traces back to the only God," representatives of Islam said.

"We all have one forefather, Abraham," representatives of Judaism supported them.

"Thou shalt not kill your neighbour," said a representative of Buddhism in his speech.

"Peace and concord should come through the harmony between yourself and the nature," was a quote by Tao adherents.

"Help the other one, even if he is of a different religion or a non-believer," Orthodox Christians would emphasise.

"Peace is charisma, just like our meeting is," said a churchman from Vatican.

The congress of religions ended in a general prayer. It began on 22 September by meetings between Nursultan Nazarbayev, President of Kazakhstan, and leaders of religious delegations that had come to the forum. By the way, Franciscan leaders of Assisi were the first to be received by the head of the state.

This city became the venue for meetings of representatives of different confessions. It was from Assisi that the "Ten Appeals" of world religion leaders were read by His Holiness Pope John Paul II in his address, *IL Deccalogo*.

And now the baton was passed to Astana, the capital of a young independent country, which, as the congress participants would note, is a paragon for implementing a clear-cut policy aimed at preserving and strengthening the inter-ethnic and inter-confessional accord in the society.

So, the initiative by Nursultan Nazarbayev, a lay leader of a lay state, was welcomed by religious leaders. Since the beginning of 2003, President of Kazakhstan has met with Pope John Paul II; Alexis II, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia; Sheikh At-Turki, Secretary General of the World Islamic League; Jona Metsger, Chief Rabbi of Israel (Ashkenazi); and each of them approved the idea of holding the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions. The President of Kazakhstan's initiative also received support from Shiah leaders, Protestant churches, Hinduism, Taoism, and Shintoism.

In September 2003, the delegations of the world's largest faiths came to Astana.

The idea that it is only mutual understanding that can bring peace in our planet, was stressed in speeches addressed to Nursultan Nazarbayev and the participants of the First Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions by the heads of the world powers and world organisations: Kofi Annan, UN Secretary General; George Bush, US President; Vladimir Putin, President of Russia; Fahd Bin Abdul Aziz, King of Saudi Arabia; Tony Blair, British Prime Minister; Jacques Chirac, President of France; Silvio Berlusconi, Prime Minister of Italy; Hosni Mubarak, President of Egypt; Mohammad Khatami, President of Iran; Romano Prodi, President of the European Commission, and many others.



The Congress was greeted by addresses from supreme hierarchs of different churches – Pope John Paul II, Alexis II, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, Dr. Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, and Bartholomew, Patriarch of Constantinople. Each of them blessed this meeting of religious leaders and wished every success to the dialogue that began.

It is a challenging enterprise to organise and hold a top-level forum where participants represent different world outlooks, principles, and ways of thinking. The fact that the Congress not only took place but also its delegates stretched their hands to each other, is a merit of President Nursultan Nazarbayev and its importance in the modern world.

By the way, the image of hands stretched out for a shake was not virtual. The handshaking between Jona Metsger, Chief Rabbi of Israel, and Mohammed Sayed Tantau, Imam of Al-Azhar University, was interpreted as a sensation by mass media. This event was considered unprecedented by everyone, in the light of the Middle East conflict.

By the way, it is worth mentioning that Kazakhstani land had earlier been the place to overcome barriers and tension. Let's recall the first summit, Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA). On the eve of the event, the relationships between India and Pakistan had become really strained. It was in Kazakhstan that the conflict was stifled, under the auspices of CICA.

Let's get back to the Congress of Religions... Seventeen delegations from all world religions arrived to the new capital to take part in the forum, as well as honourable guests and members of international organisations. The Congress was opened early in the morning on 23 September, at the Saltanat Sarayi Reception House.

...Having taken their seat at the roundtable in the Reception House, the forum delegates did not hide their interest in each other: what are they going to talk about? will they be able not to insult feelings of "alien" religions? will they be able to understand? Nursultan Nazarbayev probably eased the tension right away, by opening the Congress and thanking all people of good will who did not remain indifferent to the idea of holding a meeting

between leaders of world and traditional religions, and who supported and contributed to preserving the peace and mutual understanding on the planet.

Warm words for the guests and the honours rendered to the participants, as well as equal treatment of each attendee, no matter what religion they represented, could not but affect the atmosphere of the event. Most importantly, the feelings were sincere: no one needs words for the sake of words; the most important thing is mutual understanding, the will to overcome mistrustfulness and openly express what you think about. This sincerity of Kazakhstan's leader was rendered to the other forum participants. Their speeches, mostly, were not declarative but rather analytical. The main thought was about the ways religions should follow to provide peace in the world and free it of extremists and fanatics.

The fact that Nursultan Nazarbayev, a person who holds a secular position of the head of the state, was elected to chair the Congress is significant. Small wonder though. The only leader of the country which volunteered to reject its nuclear weapons. The man who initiated an open dialogue between Muslims and Jews during the Conference of Peace and Concord that took place in Kazakhstan in April 2003. The president who was not only able to resolve conflicts in a multi-national and multi-religious country, but also preserve and strengthen peace – all this cannot but cause respect.

Kazakhstan's experience was duly appreciated by the world community. The Congress participants mentioned it many times in their speeches. Also, a suggestion was made to set up a centre in Astana – kind of the headquarters of the religious dialogue, the dialogue for mutual understanding and tolerance. Such was an idea of Ishmael Noko, Secretary General of the World Lutheran Federation.

The leader of the state told the forum participants about the processes taking place in Kazakhstan in the area of religion.

"We are proud to witness a unique social and humanitarian phenomenon that was reflected in the preamble of our Constitution, which begins with the words: "We, the people of Kazakhstan...", said Nursultan Nazarbayev in his speech on the first day of the forum. He mentioned a symbolic fact. In the south of our country, said the President, there is a 13th century site of an ancient settlement which used to have a Buddhist pagoda, a mosque, and a Christian church. Today, you can easily go to a mosque, an Orthodox church, a Roman Catholic cathedral, a synagogue, or a prayer house in the new capital and in all other cities of the country. And this is the thread that connects the times, pointed out Nazarbayev.

By the way, in their comments on the Congress, the world press would emphasise Kazakhstani leader's idea of establishing a Palace of Nations in the capital of the country, which would house a mosque, a church, a synagogue, and a Buddhist pagoda. People of different faiths would enter and exit through one and the same door. This symbol of equality of religions that bring the good to the world and preach such important human values as Love, Good and Peace, is significant, indeed. Of the same significance is anything that contributes to establishing friendly relationships between people.

"The ensemble of the Palace of Nations," said Nursultan Nazarbayev, "will become a symbol of unity of the peoples living in our country. Over 120 ethnic groups live and work in peace and accord in this country. More than forty confessions are free to practice their beliefs here. And all this is part of our national welfare and a chance for a stable future and development. I am positive that the inter-ethnic and inter-confessional accord we are trying to strengthen, has become a basis that allowed for dynamic radical and full-scale reforms, and that provided success in political, economic and social areas".

In implementing its foreign policy, Kazakhstan also sticks to the principles of tolerance, accord and co-operation, based on the "multi-vectored policy", the integration and consolidation for the sake of global and regional security, justice and progress. Kazakhstan was the first country that volunteered to reject the world's fourth most powerful arsenal of nuclear weapons, and to shut down the world's largest nuclear testing site forever.

The ideas of peace and good are inherent in all world and national religions, which was constantly emphasised in their leaders' speeches.

"Truly, what makes up human happiness is within each of us, and namely, in concepts and bases common for adherents of different divine religions, in a religious point of view of a human being and life. This point of view given by the Divine Revelation, proves that the whole human family goes back to the one father and the one mother", said Abdallah Bin Abdul Muhsin At-Turki, Secretary General of the World Islamic League.

"Preachers should preach love and not hate, compassion and not exclusiveness, objectivity and not superstitions. Today everyone realises the connection between religious fanaticism, violence, terrorism and gaps in education. Educators and preachers should build bridges rather than barriers", said Cardinal Josef Tomco, President of the Pope's Committee for International Eucharistic Congresses.

This idea was shared by Jamyang Luosangjumei Tudanquejinima, Deputy Chairman of the Chinese Buddhist Association, who appealed to all people of different races, beliefs and countries to treat each other in a friendly and brotherly way, and to work together, "to make the world a place of happiness and mutual understanding".

In 2003, Kazakhstan's Orthodox Church had a new head, Mefodiy, who became Metropolitan of Astana and Almaty. It is always difficult to get used to a new place, but, as the clergyman himself said on the eve of the Congress in the interview for the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta-Religii*, Kazakhstan had captivated him: "The events that took place in the cruel and bloody 20th century had demonstrated the generosity of the Kazakh people who gave shelter to many other people, and who shared bread and home with them, which made it possible for them to preserve their traditions, language and faith". He reiterated this thought in his speech at the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions. "Today," the Metropolitan said, "thanks to the government, over 3,000 religious associations that represent more than 40 confessions freely practise in the country. Not every country can boast this diversity".

Opportunities and the need to continue the contacts between religious leaders were mentioned by Zhang Jiyu, Chairman of the Chinese Taoist Association, in his speech. According to him, we should build up a dialogue rather than reject, and thus contribute to providing peace and a steady development in the world.

It is not an easy task, of course, especially now – with all globalisation and tensions not only between the countries but also between representatives of different religions. It is worth reminding that in any society, even a perfect one, and in the most perfect religion there will always be individuals marring them. But is it they that we should take as a basis of our attitude to a certain nation or a religion? Undoubtedly, no! This idea was stressed many times by many speakers at the Congress.

"It is very important that all religions teach to love each other, to sacrifice yourself for the sake of others, and that's exactly where we have hope. Telling that we love God we at the same time tell we love each other", said Rev. Nicholas Baines, Bishop of Croydon. "So, if I understand the soul of my neighbour and understand what he feels, I will be able to follow him on his way, which is especially important if this neighbour sees the world in a different way and worships another God. When one person calls another one a brother, a whole new dictionary is formed, different from the political dictionary... It is very important to hear each other, and not only hear but also act. Which is the most difficult thing to do".

The Muslims' thoughts are the same as the Catholics' ideas. "It is only through the dialogue that we overcome modern challenges, uproot violence, terrorism, and unfair wars. We will not come to a just peace if we do not acknowledge religious values, first of all," said Mehdi Hadawi Mogaddam, Chairman of the Committee for Islamic Law under Iran's Ministry of Science and New Technologies, member of the Association of Teachers at the Qum Islamic Science Centre, in his speech at the Congress. "That is why", he said, "I pray God that He send us peace and justice, unite us and help us to overcome discrimination, suppression and any evil".



"We have to resist such organisations, ban them and protect our citizens from any negative influence", said Nursultan Nazarbayev in his speech.

The leader of Kazakhstan called for religious leaders to use the creative experience accumulated by different religions during their rich history. "All of us", Nazarbayev said, "have one road to God. Now it is time for a more active dialogue between religions. We feel sheer need for a regular international inter-confessional organisation that could implement the unified will of respected spiritual leaders and ordinary believers. This function could as well be carried out by the forum of world and traditional religions. Can religion become an incentive for creation and development in the 21st century? I think our joint work during these two days has demonstrated that, it can".

According to Kazakhstan's leader, it is important to understand one simple but evident truth – we are all interdependent in the modern world. This mutual dependency is a delicate and sensible mechanism that responds to any nuances and fluctuations.

"It is significant that our common house is not only our country but the whole Earth. We all want our children, grandchildren and great grandchildren to live in peace, in a healthy environment, and in accord with other peoples and confessions, without wars or suffering".

"I hope", he added, "that our work, our prayers and compassion will help to achieve good times, when there is no more suffering of millions of people in different conflict areas".

During the First Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, a formula was worked out to confirm their commitment to eternal values, such as Tolerance, Truth, Justice, and Love. All this was reflected in the Declaration adopted at the forum.

The religious leaders who gathered in Astana, agreed that extremism, separatism, terrorism, and other forms of violence in the name of religion have nothing in common with the true concept of religion, and are the threat for humanity. They also pointed out that it is the inter-religious dialogue that is one of the key methods of public development and improving the well-being of all nations. The participants confirmed their willingness to make every effort in providing peace and human progress, and social stability as the basis for a harmonious peace in the future.

Upon completion of the First Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, the forum participants headed towards the Baiterek Monument. After the prayer, the guests went up the monument and left memorial inscriptions on the canvass with the words "May Kazakhstan, the Land of Peace and Concord, Be Blessed".

The Congress was over, and its participants greatly appreciated N. Nazarbayev and the people of the country for organising the inter-religious dialogue. Addressing the President of Kazakhstan, Jona, Chief Rabbi of Israel, said: "You are following the road of our common forefather, Abraham, who was the first to allow guests in his tent. You have turned your country into a country of peace between religions at the international level".

Vladimir Sotirov, Special Representative of UN Secretary General, spoke highly of the forum, too. He said the forum was of a great international and historical importance: "The forum made us understand that all religions have the same human values. These include aspiration for peace, love, tolerance, and justice".

In accordance with the resolution adopted at the forum, the Congresses of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions will now be held at least once every three years. The next forum will take place in Astana again. Besides, religious leaders asked Kazakhstan, as the Congress initiator, to work out all aspects concerning the establishment of a regular Secretariat of the Congress.

"Understanding is the beginning of concord". This adage by a famous philosopher, Benedict Spinoza, can best be used to characterise the outcomes of the First Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions.

The Congress is over, but the dialogue that began there continues.





2003

**АСТАНА
ASTANA**

is a library; religious and national holidays are celebrated. A great deal of attention is paid to the enlightening work. The Avneer Sunday school teaches Hebrew and the basics of the Judaist religion. There is also a summer camp for children.

The Jewish Congress of Kazakhstan was established in 1999. The Congress strives to help preserve and popularise national customs and traditions, and cultural and religious heritage of the Jewish. The Centre has elaborated a program of construction of synagogues in Kazakhstan – in Astana, Pavlodar, Aktobe, Kustanai, Petropavlovsk, and Ust-Kamenogorsk. The program has already started. The Jewish Congress publishes a monthly newspaper *Shalom* (circulation 99 copies); a Judaic calendar is published jointly with the KHABAD-Lubavich Jewish Centre.

In general, the situation with the Jewish community in Kazakhstan is a good example of possibilities in terms of freedom of religion in Kazakhstan.

Buddhism in Kazakhstan

Buddhism came to Central Asia and Kazakhstan in V-VI centuries due to the influence of the Kushan Empire which spread on a territory from the Aral Sea to the Talas River. According to a Bugut sign (dated VI century), under the rule of the first Turk Kaganat Taspatalgan tried to establish Buddhism as a state religion. With this purpose, he build a temple and invited a preacher from India by the name of Chinaputta, who established a Buddhist community. The break-up of the kaganat resulted in the weakening of the position of Buddhism. However, it kept strong positions in the east and west of this state. In particular, according to historical data, Buddhism was especially widely spread among the tribes of Eastern Turkestan (so-called yellow Uigurs).

In the recent years, the archaeological works discovered Buddhist temples in South Kazakhstan Oblast, in submountain regions of Zhambyl Oblast, and on the Kazakh-Chinese border, near the Jungar Gates. Buddhism was also spread with the Kalmyks who practice nomadic cattle-breeding in certain areas in Northern Kazakhstan in the end of XIX century.

In 1999 the adherents of the newly-registered Buddhist community in Almaty for the first time celebrated the New Year in accordance with the Buddhist calendar. The community brings together different nationalities, including Buryats and Mongols (they practice Buddhism), and Kalmyks, who practice traditional Lamaism. The community has about 150 followers. To conduct ceremonies, the community invites preachers from Russia. There is also a small community of traditional Buddhism, which is widely spread in Korea (Von-Buddhism).

Buddhism as an ideology enjoy a certain degree of popularity among the intelligentsia.

In the recent years, there have been observations of Kazakhstani Buddhists going for a pilgrimage to Nepal, north India, and other sacred Buddhist places.

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