

Is Central Asia becoming a model for religious tolerance?

By L. Todd Wood

Originally published by *The Washington Times*, 16th October 2018



The tri-annual [Congress](#) of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions held this month in Astana, [Kazakhstan](#), is a gathering of the world's top clerics to try to bring understanding between different religious faiths, and also to unite against religious extremism. It is possibly the latter goal which is the most important and could have the most benefit for East and West.

With the Syrian civil war having not yet run its course and as the killings continue, working to end religious extremism is an area that could bring the West and the newly developing world, as terror is a blight on all our societies and a threat to governments worldwide.

To buttress this point, [Kazakhstan](#)'s President Nursultan Nazarbayev said at the [Congress](#) that "inter-civilizational conflicts look absurd against the backdrop of scientific and technological progress. But at this very moment the shape of the future of humanity is being formed. In what condition will we pass on our common planet to future generations – this is the main civilizational problem ... peace, prosperity and wealth have not become the main trend of human development. The world community has not been able to get out of the sinister circle of mutual distrust, hostility and conflict.

“We see that the situation has worsened ... the most dangerous issue is that in the minds and hearts of people, a feeling of mutual estrangement is increasing. However each religion fully recognizes universal human values, the unity of moral principles. I am sure that it is the spiritual principle, woven from a multitude of beliefs, faiths and ideals that should give impetus to the unifying processes.”

Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, the Senate chairman and the former prime minister, noted that the Syrian conflict, mass murders of believers, and the destruction of religious buildings, religious sites and monuments of world heritage in various regions of the world, is a challenge to global stability and security.

“The U.N. Charter, which prohibits the use of force or the threat of its use in relation to the territorial integrity and political independence of any state, is subject to oblivion. ... the Astana Congress of the Leaders of World and Traditional Religions should become an effective tool for addressing long-standing problems,” Mr. Tokayev said.

“On September 28, the majority of the Security Council member states signed the Code of Conduct Towards Achieving a World Free of Terrorism. The Council of Religious Leaders could take that document as a basis for drafting relevant world religious and political proposals to prevent the threat of terrorism. It is to these measures that we intend to direct the activities of the congress secretariat during the interval between the congresses,” he added.

It is fitting that the Religious [Congress](#) is being held in a culturally majority-Muslim country, although one that could be considered secular in many ways, as religious extremism in today’s world is mainly derived from the Middle East, Pakistan and parts of Southeast Asia, and virulent forms of Islam, stretching from parts of Russia to Tehran.

Said Egypt’s Ahmed el-Tayyeb, grand imam of al Azhar and president of the Muslim Council of Elders: “The [Congress](#) is considered the biggest dialogue platform in the world where clerics, politicians, scholars and international organizations convene in order to probe a broad range of issues connected with religion and politics.”

Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel R. Yitzhak Yosef issued a call for the men of faith to staunchly oppose terrorism: “In the event of a terror attack, our voice as spiritual leaders must be heard loud and clear. We mustn’t stay silent. That silence is akin to effectively identifying with terror.”

[Kazakhstan](#), a young country at only 26 years old, should be given credit for hosting and facilitating the agenda of the World Religious [Congress](#). This year’s conclave is the sixth since its inception.

We are all aware that Islam could use a reformation, Eastern Orthodox Christianity could use some internal peacemaking after a severe split over Ukraine and Catholic clergy could use some cleansing of its pedophile ranks.

Perhaps the Religious [Congress](#) in [Kazakhstan](#) is exactly the type of forum where the spreading of modern religious concepts could be facilitated, taking the world out of the Dark Ages and into the age of artificial intelligence and the challenges it could pose to religion. Mr. Nazarbayev said as much during his opening speech to the [Congress](#), “Firstly, in the era of the information age, we must take full advantage of new technologies in order to promote the ideas of peace and harmony at the global level.”

Bartholomew I, the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church and Archbishop of Constantinople said at the World Religious Conference, “Let the high ideals for the sake of which we have worked in concord and love these days, become the strong reality in the name of world peace and happiness of peoples. Praying to God inspired.”

The adopted Declaration of the VI [Congress](#) of the Leaders of World and Traditional Religions called to respect equal rights and freedoms of all citizens regardless of racial, linguistic, religious, national, ethnic, social background, wealth, birth or other status, and act toward one another in the spirit of brotherhood. The religious leaders promised to support initiatives seeking to promote inter-religious and interfaith dialogue, which is a fundamental goal of the international community in its commitment to build a just and conflict-free world and to express solidarity with all religious groups and ethnic communities that have suffered human rights abuses and violence by extremists and terrorists.

Such a lofty goal, but as Steve Jobs famously said, “Those who are crazy enough to think they can change the world usually do.”