

## Ecological culture in the traditional worldview of the Turks (Tengriism and folk Islam)

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### Abstract

*Today, one of the most significant global threats to international security is environmental issues. In the modern world, key environmental challenges include ozone layer depletion, global warming, air pollution, the greenhouse effect, ocean pollution, and the loss of biodiversity on Earth. Religion, as a core element of any culture and civilization, shapes the worldview of an ethnic group and its relationship with the natural environment. Religions can be divided into "ecological" and "non-ecological" categories. This article examines the issue from the perspective of the traditional worldview of the Turkic peoples, which is regarded as an ecological religion.*

**Keywords:** *Kazakh, English, Latin, origin, experience, research.*

### Introduction

There is no doubt that ecology is one of the most pressing global issues of the 21st century. Today, our planet faces numerous threats to the environment, some of which are local, while others are shared by all countries.

This article is dedicated to the pressing ecological issues of today. It presents various approaches from representatives of different worldviews, emphasizes the connection between environmental degradation and the moral decay of society, and explores ways to overcome the ecological crisis, which can only be achieved through transformations in the spiritual realm.

### Broader Context

In the modern world, the mutual influence of humans and nature has become a topic of intense ideological debate. Some of humanity's key environmental problems were first identified in 1972 at the inaugural international environmental conference—the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment. At that time, scientists and experts urged nations to use the Earth's natural resources responsibly, limit heat emissions, and prevent marine pollution. More than 50 years have passed since then, yet these issues remain unresolved. On the contrary, they have worsened each year, and the list of challenges continues to grow.

The global environmental crisis is a consequence of a crisis in spiritual development, stemming from a worldview that prioritizes the individual above religion, the nation, society, the state, and the surrounding natural environment. In contemporary conditions, religion, as a foundational element of any culture and civilization, shapes an ethnic group's worldview and its relationship with the natural world.

The traditional worldview of the Turkic peoples, classified as an "ecological religion" due to its close structural and ideological connection to nature and the environment, represents a universal religious system.

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This system has the potential to contribute to the regulation of environmental problems in the modern world and to promote environmental education among younger generations.

## Literature Review

Exploring the relationship between religion and ecological culture, historians from countries outside the influence of Soviet-communist ideology, particularly from the West, have taken the lead on this issue. Criticizing the Soviet method of studying history, they propose new approaches to world history and civilizations for Western historians who adhere to a rationalist civilization. The research widely incorporates the perspectives of scholars such as L. White, A.Yu. Evdokimov, and A. Toynbee. Specifically, the concepts of these researchers have been employed in conclusions regarding the significance of spiritual values in shaping ecological culture, values that were previously neglected and remain undervalued today.

For countries where Turkic peoples of the former Soviet Union have shed the yoke of communist ideology and turned to a new market-based economic system, A. Toynbee's opinion holds particular significance. He stated: "No matter how vast the gap between traditional religious beliefs and current immediate experience, a kind of religious renaissance will occur... Despite the strengthening of views that regard religion as a mere illusion, an imagined sentiment, the tendency to seek spiritual resources through the revival of past beliefs in society never disappears" (Toynbee, 1991, 536). In his article "The Religious Foundations of the Modern Environmental Crisis" (1973), Toynbee attributed responsibility for the ecological crisis to certain passages in the Holy Scriptures, which assign humanity the role of the pinnacle of nature and its master (Genesis 1:26) (Evdokimov, 2018, 415).

Russian researcher A.Yu. Evdokimov, in his article "Ecological Theology: Questions and Issues," introduces a new classification of religions based on their ecological nature, assessed through the impact of culture and civilization on the biosphere (Evdokimov, 2018, 411).

Criticizing Christianity, L. White, in his article "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," argues that "by destroying pagan animism, Christianity opened up the psychological possibility of exploiting nature with indifference to the well-being of natural objects" (White, 1990, 188). White does not see the solution to the crisis in improving science and technology, as they stem from Christianity's relationship with nature, but rather in changing religion or reinterpreting the old one (White, 1990, 189).

Critics of the non-ecological nature of world religions often cite ancient Greek pagan cults, Buddhism, Shintoism, Taoism, and Zoroastrianism as examples of more ecological religions, while overlooking the traditional worldview of the Turkic peoples.

### *Research Problem*

During the period of industrialization, which directly impacts modern economic development, it is crucial to regulate the ecological balance in nature, preserve the environment, and pass it on to future generations. Looking back at our history, we can see that the formation and development of Turkic statehood went hand in hand with religion. The traditional beliefs of the Turkic peoples constituted an ideological system that influenced their culture and way of life, contributing to the preservation of their habitat.

In light of modern environmental issues, the question of utilizing the ideological potential of this religion has arisen. It is increasingly clear that prioritizing only economic needs while disregarding spiritual values cannot fully address the ideological demand for maintaining ecological balance on our planet.

### *Objectives and Research Questions*

It is true that the traditional beliefs of the Turkic peoples represent a historically proven ideological system capable of influencing the ecological culture of the people. This is due to its deep roots and spiritual origins in nature, its development in close connection with the environment, and its widespread presence among Turkic communities as the foundation for other world religions. In this context, during the period of

globalization, it is crucial to reinvent the cultural and spiritual values of humanity, restore the potential of ancient faith in fostering ecological education, and establish a historical basis for ecological culture.

The main objective of this research is to determine the influence of the traditional worldview of the Turkic peoples on the formation and development of their ecological culture.

To achieve this goal, the research addresses the following questions:

- What is the role of religion in shaping ecological culture?
- What elements connect humans with the environment in the traditional worldview of the Turkic peoples?
- Do ecological elements of ancient traditional beliefs persist in the belief systems of Turkic peoples who have adopted world religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, etc.)?
- What ecological education programs are being implemented today in Turkic states?
- How is ecological education for youth, based on the traditional worldview, being carried out in modern Turkic states such as Kazakhstan?

The answers to these and other questions will form the foundation for creating an ecological culture rooted in the traditional worldview. This foundation will benefit not only modern Turkic society but humanity as a whole.

### *Outline of the Paper*

This article is structured as follows:

The **Introduction** provides background information on the significance of the traditional worldview of the Turkic peoples in addressing environmental issues and shaping the ecological culture of modern humanity. It outlines the research problem, objectives, and overall structure of the study.

The **Methodology** describes the qualitative research methods used, including the analysis of ethnographic data and literature on the traditional worldview of the Turkic peoples.

The **Results** section presents the findings of a comparative analysis of the traditional worldview of the Turkic peoples, focusing on key subjects and their interactions.

In the **Discussion** section, these results are interpreted in the context of existing literature, examining both theoretical and practical implications.

Finally, the **Conclusion** summarizes the main findings and their implications, offers policy recommendations, and suggests directions for future research.

By exploring the role of the traditional worldview of the Turkic peoples in addressing environmental challenges, this study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how traditional worldviews shape the ecological culture of populations in modern society.

## **Methods**

### *Research Design*

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing ethnographic materials to explore the traditional worldview system and identify elements of ecological education among the Turkic peoples.

The traditional historical memory of the Turkic peoples was eroded when it did not align with a materialistic perspective on history. Instead, an entirely different version of Kazakh history was written and presented as authentic, based on travel notes and works by foreign politicians, historians, geographers, and researchers—including Chinese, Greeks, Arabs, Persians, and Italians. A people with a rich spiritual worldview were depicted in a materialistically written history as a wild or semi-wild society that prioritized livestock and pastures over everything else. The spiritual world and culture of the indigenous people were largely ignored.

These issues highlight the comprehensive and multifaceted pressures faced by the Turkic peoples in the spiritual sphere today. It is evident that restoring the spiritual independence of the Turkic peoples has become a state-level task. Without recovering their lost spiritual and cultural values, it will be impossible to eliminate the spiritual stagnation in the consciousness of the people and free them from a servile mentality. A nation that cannot preserve its spiritual and cultural independence cannot maintain its statehood.

In such challenging times, the solution lies in the widespread promotion of the rich spiritual and cultural heritage and history of the Turkic peoples, accumulated over centuries. However, it is already clear that this restoration will not be easy. During the Soviet era, a Eurocentric approach to Kazakh history and culture, combined with a materialistic analysis of history, dealt a serious blow to the traditional history and culture of the Turkic peoples.

The materialistic interpretation of history transformed humans into selfish beings, ready to sacrifice spiritual values for material gain (Esim, 1996, 17).

The level of awareness and spiritual strength of any ethnic group depends on how deeply religious ideas are embedded in the consciousness of the people. In other words, religion and religious knowledge determine the direction of the development of customs, traditions, and the overall culture of a nation. Therefore, studying religious processes in Kazakh society offers an opportunity to analyze Kazakh history from a different perspective.

The main focus of this research is the history of religious processes in Kazakh society, utilizing methods of studying religion. These methods include:

1. **Historical-Comparative Method:** This approach analyzes societal changes by comparing the status of a particular religion across different periods.
2. **Historical Approach and Reconstruction:** This method examines the extent to which spiritual connections and shared meanings are linked to societal changes and shifts in consciousness.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations in this study primarily focus on the responsible use of secondary data. Measures were taken to ensure data integrity by critically evaluating the credibility and reliability of all sources, including verifying the authenticity of ethnographic materials and field studies. Additionally, proper citations were provided for all sources used, respecting intellectual property rights and avoiding plagiarism.

### Result and Discussion

#### *Research Result*

Although the environmental crisis is considered a global phenomenon in modern science, its origins and solutions are debated differently across various social systems. Researchers have thus identified two main trends in Western literature (Akhmetov, 1981, 18). The first trend is technocratic-radicalism and socio-political conservatism. Proponents of this approach, such as B. Commoner, D. Meadows, J. Forrester, and others, argue that the development of natural sciences and technology causes the environmental crisis, which can be overcome through further advancements in science and technology. Conversely,

representatives of the second trend adhere to the concept of ecological pessimism, rejecting the idea of social progress. The most extreme stage of this pessimism leads to technophobia, viewing humanity's technical consciousness as a path to its eventual extinction. For example, B. Russell himself stated, "We live in the last century of humanity, and if this is so, humanity owes its demise to science" (Akhmetov, 1981, 19).

In this context, researchers began to explore the spiritual and cultural potential of world religions in shaping the ecological culture of societies as the only way out of the environmental crisis. However, studies revealed that the systems and ideas of these religions do not inherently exert a positive influence on ecological culture.

A relatively new classification of religions—based on their ecological orientation—proves to be quite complex, as followers of specific religions often view their own beliefs as inherently ecological. The criterion for assessing religions from an ecological perspective is undoubtedly the impact of their culture and civilization on the biosphere. Thus, religions can be classified as "ecological" or "non-ecological." From an atheistic perspective, all pagan religions and pantheism are considered ecological, while Christianity and Judaism are categorized as non-ecological (Islam, for some "strange" reason, is often included among ecological religions despite its Old Testament foundations). Such interpretations even find their way into school textbooks (Evdokimov, 2018, 414).

A.Yu. Evdokimov writes: "A monopoly of humanity over spirituality in our world has been firmly established, and the old prohibitions on exploiting nature have been dismantled. I do not think that many modern Americans concerned with the environmental crisis are able or willing to consult wolves or admonish birds. The current large-scale destruction of nature is the result of dynamic science and technology, the origins of which lie in the Western Middle Ages, against which St. Francis rebelled in such an original way. The historical expansion of science and technology cannot be understood without considering the specific relationship with nature deeply rooted in Christian dogma. The fact that many do not consider this attitude inherently Christian is irrelevant. No alternative system of fundamental values has been adopted in our society to replace the former Christian values. Consequently, we will continue to deepen the environmental crisis until we reject the Christian doctrine that nature has no purpose other than to serve humanity" (Evdokimov, 2018, 415).

This critique underscores the role of religious and cultural ideologies in shaping attitudes toward the environment and highlights the need for a shift in foundational values to address the global environmental crisis.

A.Yu. Evdokimov, analyzing the available information, concludes that ecological theology in its modern form is evidently capable only of accumulating descriptive information about the ecological aspects of various religions but is unable to address the spiritual education of individuals (Evdokimov, 2018, 418).

A similar perspective was offered by the English historian A. Toynbee, who argued that the only solution, in his view, was a return to paganism. Among the more ecological religions, Toynbee mentioned ancient Greek pagan cults, Buddhism, Shintoism, Taoism, and Zoroastrianism (Evdokimov, 2028, 414).

Unfortunately, none of these researchers paid attention to the traditional worldview of the Turkic peoples as an ecological religion. This oversight is due, first, to the limited awareness of foreign researchers about the beliefs of contemporary Turkic peoples; second, to the perception of modern Turkic peoples in Central Asia as adherents of Islam from the Arabian Peninsula or other traditional Muslim countries; and third, to a lack of understanding of the specific characteristics of Islam among these Turkic peoples.

In reality, Islam among the Turkic peoples—Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Uyghurs, Turkmen, Kyrgyz, and others—developed in close connection with their belief in Tengrism, the primary religion of these peoples prior to Islam. Tengrism, as the traditional religious system of the Turkic peoples, exerted significant spiritual and cultural influence, fostering an ecological consciousness among them.

However, the anti-religious policies of the Soviet Union diminished the influence of Tengrism and led to spiritual nihilism in modern generations of Turkic peoples. Like the rest of the world, Turkic peoples are not immune to environmental problems. For years, domestic researchers have studied the Soviet Turkic peoples, whose underground and surface natural resources were exploited as raw materials by the Soviet Empire, often accompanied by environmental damage caused by various test sites (Utarbaeva, 1998, 5).

Among the most critical measures to prevent environmental pollution, the elevation of ecological education to the highest level within society—especially for those closely connected with nature—is often discussed. Indeed, punitive measures and fines have had limited success in restoring degraded nature and preventing pollution. It has become evident that only family and school education based on a traditional worldview can encourage members of society to preserve nature.

Domestic researchers, who began studying this area in the early 1990s, correctly highlight the importance of an ecological education system in overcoming the environmental crisis. The prominent Kazakh scientist A. Beysenova, who conducted extensive research in the field of ecology, notes that the ecological situation in the country has reached a critical threshold. She writes that significant work has been done in this area, including scientific research and the creation of textbooks. However, A. Beysenova warns of the insufficiency of these measures in preventing environmental pollution in the country. Although these efforts support broader economic, social, and environmental policies, their impact has been limited due to a lack of widespread dissemination. She notes, "They are shared with the general public only within a single educational institution" (Beysenova, 2003, 4).

This underscores the need for a more systemic and widely adopted approach to ecological education, grounded in traditional worldviews, to effectively address the environmental crisis.

All this demonstrates that environmental efforts have the support of the nation as a whole, yet there is no opportunity to broadly implement such measures. "The situation with environmental education in schools is unsatisfactory" (Beysenova, 2003, 4).

At that time, it became necessary to expand the issue of environmental education and awareness among the population, based on a traditional worldview, at the state level. Environmental education is defined as "explaining to people the harmony between the human community, society, nature, and the environment, as well as ways to use it effectively." Improving environmental and conservation legislation and ensuring its strict enforcement, increasing responsibility for the effective use of natural resources, enhancing compatibility between the environment and human health, accelerating continuous environmental education, ensuring that information about the country's ecological state reaches the population, and addressing many other issues are key tasks in this field (Beysenova, 2003, 4).

The scholar correctly recognized the importance of national traditions in environmental education. "The scientific foundation for continuous environmental education is rooted in the historical worldview and traditions of the Kazakh people, born out of their relationship with nature. Nomadic Kazakhs connected their entire lives to nature. They preserved it, considered it sacred even for animals and birds, and maintained rivers and water sources in cleanliness and order" (Beysenova, 2003, 4).

Overall, given that Kazakh customs are closely tied to religion and worldview, it is evident that religion plays a crucial role in shaping an ecological mindset. In this context, A. Toynbee observed that "no matter how vast the gap between traditional religious beliefs and current immediate experiences, a kind of religious renaissance will still be observed." Despite the deep-rooted perspective that views religion as an illusion or imaginary sentiment, the tendency to seek spiritual resources by reviving past faith never disappears in society. It is natural, therefore, that the ancient belief in the necessity of nature influences the current response to environmental pollution. Our ancestors instinctively felt that harm done to nature by humans would not go unpunished. Our own experiences fully confirm that this world is not an infinite resource to be exploited endlessly but an interconnected ecological system of which humans are an integral part (Toynbee, 1991, 616).



Toynbee further argued that "developed countries continue to spread their cultural values across the world. However, the technology that once symbolized the West's superiority has now turned against it, bringing harm where it once brought benefit. He warns that social inequality, spiritual decline, and humanity's disconnection from nature are all consequences of the Western world's expanded industrialization" (Toynbee, 1991, 617).

In our view, the only effective way to protect the environment from pollution is to ensure environmental education rooted in the traditional worldview of the Turkic peoples for members of society who interact with the natural environment. However, it is evident that achieving this goal artificially, relying solely on bare facts, will not yield significant results. It is essential to revive a worldview in the public consciousness that is deeply connected to the nation's history, even if it is rooted in religion. This worldview indeed existed in our early history. Evidence of this can be found in customs, superstitions, teachings, and rules related to the environment within the Kazakh belief system.

For example, in the worldview of the Kazakh people, concepts such as "you must not divert flowing water," "you must not pollute water," and "you must not leave dirty items or pour dirty water into it" are prominent (Kurally, 1998, 46). The concept of *obal* (regret or remorse) plays a significant role in environmental protection. This theme was even addressed in the works of Kazakh-Turkish poets:

*What you sow in black soil, so shall it grow.*

If elements of the traditional Turkic worldview were sought in the words of the 11th-century Turkic thinker J. Balasaguni and transformed into a foundation for a national idea, they could provide valuable insights.

From the creation of early Turkic tribal-state structures to the era of the Kazakh Khanate, the traditional worldview served as a belief system that contributed to the formation and development of Turkic statehood. At its foundation were beliefs in spirits of ancestors, reverence for nature, and respect for animals, culminating in a system of faith that acknowledged a singular Creator. As Turkic statehood evolved through various historical periods, this system grew more complex, incorporating new ideas that did not contradict its monotheistic nature or uniqueness.

Although the Turkic belief system shares ideological similarities with religious systems in other parts of the world, it is an ancient Turkic system, independent in origin and era, with distinct characteristics. Undoubtedly, its influence on early forms of Turkic statehood provided the foundation for the emergence of rational individuals and humanity's aspiration to live in organized societies.

The pre-Islamic traditional worldview of the Turkic peoples, often referred to as *Tengrism*, encompasses the following key religious concepts:

1. **Tengri** – The Creator God of the Turkic peoples, the source of blessings, the observer, and the one who answers prayers.
2. **Zher-Su (Earth-Water)** – The homeland, sphere of life, and dwelling place granted by Tengri to the Turkic peoples and humanity.
3. **Umai** – The feminine principle of the world, protector and patron of children and women.
4. **Qut** – Prosperity, fate, life force, or energy dedicated to Tengri, shared with the Turkic peoples.
5. **Spirit of Ancestors** – The spirits of deceased ancestors, supported by Tengri, guiding the living.
6. **Apat (Disaster)** – Divine punishment for the Turkic peoples when they stray from the path set by Tengri.

## 7. **Obal (Compassion) and Sauap (Reward)** – Concepts that regulate human relationships with other people, animals, and plants created by Tengri in the surrounding world.

These foundational religious concepts defined the scope of activities aimed at forming Turkic statehood, regulating social relations, organizing internal and external affairs within the khanate, and educating the people. Secondary religious concepts, while subordinate to the primary ones, also depended on Tengri, the central figure of worship in the belief system. For instance, religious rituals related to celestial bodies, sacred sites, and smaller ceremonies became auxiliary elements of Turkic worship, forming part of the traditional religious system and playing a secondary role.

At the center of the traditional Turkic worldview was the Absolute Spirit, or Tengri, the Creator God. In the Turkic worldview, Tengri is a deity with boundless creative, punitive, and blessing qualities. Tengri is the object of worship in a monotheistic faith with an eternal and primordial nature. That is, Tengri was not created by anyone and is both the First and the Last. The eternal and primordial character of Tengri is evidenced by the dual use of the name *Eternal Tengri* in ancient Turkic inscriptions and the decrees of Genghis Khan.

The ancient Turkic religion was a monotheistic belief system where Tengri, the central figure of all deities, exerted absolute influence over all forms of life (Orynbekov, 2001).

A key object of Turkic faith was **Umai**, regarded as the protector of family and children. In ancient Turkic writings, the status of Heaven-God is reflected in the identification of the role of women in the patriarchal Turkic society with Umai, symbolized as father-khan-heaven (*kagan-aspana*) and mother-woman-Umai (*cheche-katyn-Umai*). In the divine hierarchy described in the Kudyrga, Zhetysu, and Issyk-Kul monuments, Earth-Water occupied the lowest place in the triad of deities. Tengri was considered the supreme entity, while the son remained in a subordinate position. The role of Umai in Turkic society was also mirrored in the Ashide power structure of the Turkic Khaganate (Torlanbayeva, 2004, 214).

Over time, the influence of other religions that gained prominence in Turkic society diminished Umai's importance, eventually removing it from the state governance system. However, the manifestation of Umai Ana (Mother Umai) in a form of "rigid" dual authority persisted in Turkic culture and societal structures, with remnants of this influence still evident today. The significant role of women within the family in Kazakh culture and social consciousness has been partially preserved.

Another sacred concept for the Turkic peoples was **Zher-Su (Earth-Water)**. According to the Turkic worldview, Earth and Water represent the natural environment where humans live—the land, the homeland. Ancient Turkic inscriptions reference Earth-Water as the land, the soil with water, the country, and the homeland. According to tradition, Earth is the mother of humanity, life, fauna, and flora. For this reason, humanity revered Mother Earth. In Turkic beliefs, the sacred homeland—Earth-Water—was to be protected and never neglected: *Our ancestors preserved it*,

*Earth and water must not remain without guardians.*

For the Turkic peoples, maintaining the land's purity was essential, not only in the material sense but also spiritually. This is evident in the lines from ancient Turkic inscriptions stating, *"I slaughtered and killed them, the Karluks, because they desecrated the land."* These lines reflect the ideological basis of Turkic attacks on the Karluks, who disrupted the traditional society. For the Turkic people, who considered themselves the active political and spiritual supporters of Tengri, such actions were justified (Omiraliyev, 1985, 84).

In the traditional worldview of the Turkic peoples, the community was ideologically linked to Tengri, Earth-Water, the khan, and the destiny of the beks (leaders). Their harmony was seen as the foundation of societal stability. This is described in ancient writings:

*"If you, Turk, do not separate yourself from your father, mother, and homeland (Zher-Su), you will live a happy life, remain in your home, and live without sorrow"* (Omiraliyev, 1985, 85).



The creation myths within the traditional Turkic worldview are remarkably similar to those of other nations and even global religions. According to ancient Turkic legend, the world was initially enveloped in black darkness and fog. Over time, the thread connecting Earth and Sky was severed. Subsequently, the two elements separated, their formations grew, and between them, the Sun and Moon emerged, taking their places in the infinite expanse. After this, the world was divided into realms of darkness and light. Human and animal life began in areas illuminated by this light.

According to the worldview of the ancient Turkic peoples, God is the creator of eighteen thousand universes, our universe, Earth (as part of the universe), beings, and humans, who are considered the main force. In the traditional Turkic worldview, the central idea of how God created the world is that God is the creator of everything, regardless of the specifics of the narrative.

The Turkic peoples divided the world into three vertical levels and four horizontal directions. The **upper world** was regarded as a sacred realm, close to God. The **middle world** was where humans lived, encompassing Earth and Water. In Turkic cosmology, the **third and lowest level** was the maternal world, the afterlife, the abode of the dead.

In ancient Turkic mythology, **Erlık**, the lord of the underworld, occupied the lowest level. In their beliefs, the lower world was the realm of the dead. The Turkic peoples believed that after death, a person's soul transitioned to another world. For this reason, Kazakhs do not say that someone "died" but instead say "returned," meaning they returned to the place from which they came (Toleubaev, 1992, 16).

From a cognitive perspective, elements such as land, mountains, stones, springs, and trees held sacred significance as manifestations of God on Earth, beyond their physical existence. It was believed that these natural elements possessed spirits, carriers, and guardians. From a religious standpoint, these natural elements were separated from their material nature in human consciousness and directly integrated with the holy attributes of God. The Turkic peoples believed that every animal and object (mountains, stones, rivers, lakes) had a unique meaning that influenced human life (Kenzhetai, 2004, 34). They also believed that shamans could communicate with these spirits. This concept of sacredness contributed to preserving ecological and social harmony between humans and nature.

The Turkic peoples regarded celestial bodies, such as the sun, moon, and stars, as sacred entities in the heavens. Nomadic life, closely tied to nature, allowed them to predict the weather by observing the movements of these celestial objects. **Fire** was also considered sacred. Fire was treated with respect and was part of the purification rituals. According to Turkic beliefs, it was forbidden to spit into the fire or urinate on it. Stepping on ashes was also viewed as a bad omen. However, as noted by L. Gumilev, there is no need to attribute these practices to Zoroastrianism. While they may appear similar, fire in Iran is a religiously revered force, whereas for the Turkic peoples, it was primarily a means of purification (Gumilev, 1994, 81).

In the Turkic worldview, **trees and springs** were sacred as they symbolically connected the three levels of the world. The roots of a tree drew sustenance from the lower world, its trunk existed in the middle world, and its branches and leaves extended into the upper world. This is why trees were central to the Turkic perception of the cosmos. Trees and rivers connected two spaces: the tree vertically, and the river horizontally. Springs were also sacred to the Turkic peoples because they emerged from the underground and traversed both worlds.

Humans were considered the most important creation among all beings created by God. According to ancient Turkic legends, humans were created by **Ata Tangir (Father Tengri)** and **Umai**. In these legends, God fashioned humans from clay. The water used to break and knead the clay was also considered to possess special properties.

The relationship between humans and nature is regulated by **Tengri**. Blessings and rewards are concepts that govern human interactions with other people, animals, plants, and the surrounding world, all of which are created by **Tengri**. The concept of *obal* imposed restrictions on the destruction of immature plants and

young offspring, particularly during the use of natural resources, such as hunting. Rewards are seen as acts of goodness pleasing to **Tengri**—good deeds, virtuous character, and mutually beneficial actions toward other people and nature. A person seeking blessings must perform many good deeds.

In the Turkic worldview, particular importance was given to fulfilling human instincts such as fear, the pursuit of success, and inner peace. Among these, the concept of **qut** (prosperity) was paramount. It reflected the infinite generosity of God, the Almighty Creator, and was granted to almost all human beings created by Him:

However, while one was born with *qut*, its continuation as an eternal companion depended on one's way of life and behavior.

If a person lives in harmony with society and nature, adhering to the rules of life established by God, they receive divine grace and love. This initial blessing transforms into true divine prosperity, extending not only to the individual but also to their descendants. Conversely, if a person's actions deprive others—whether individuals, society, or nature—of well-being, they forfeit the value of God's blessings. Should they commit sins, they reject these blessings altogether. Such individuals face misfortune, illness, or even death.

**Qut** is the essence that connects humans to God, God to the world, and humans to the world. Life without happiness is meaningless. Where there is no happiness, there is no order, no state, and no prosperity (Butanayev, 2003, 114).

This is why, as social relationships developed among the Turkic peoples, the importance of *qut* grew. Receiving blessings became the life goal of every Turk. Preserving traditional Turkic statehood was essential for the development of the state. However, when foreign ideas, which undermined the meaning of *qut*, entered Turkic governance, the significance of *qut* declined, leading to a weakened society and state indifferent to the lack of prosperity in the country. For medieval Turks, *qut* was a vital pillar of faith not only for individuals but also for the preservation and development of the state. *Qut* was not a gift given solely to an individual but a divine blessing bestowed upon families, clans, villages, and even entire nations.

If the misfortune of individuals resulted only in a loss of personal happiness, discord within the entire country and society, as well as moral and psychological instability, often spiraled out of control due to disturbances in the environment. When the world order was disrupted, an **Apat** (catastrophe) would occur, threatening the very foundations of the state. If the ruler, the people, and the nation repented and recovered, the disaster would recede. If not, the depths of the calamity would lead to destruction.

Turkic records describe such catastrophes: *"Heaven and Earth are in crisis. They (the Toghuz-Oghuz people) have become our enemies. The state is dying. The beks are rising. The sky is cloudy. It is said that the Earth is shrinking, and it is said: 'Trk is growing.' Animals, birds, and people have lost their way. This lasted for three years."*

This global catastrophe was described as *"the heavens stopped with forgiveness"* (Donuk, 2001, 37).

**Shamans** (*kam*, *shaman*, etc.) performed religious services for the fundamental elements of Turkic traditional beliefs, acting as mediators between people, transmitters of divine will, and sources of guidance. A shaman, who acted religiously according to God's will, was free from worldly interests and used their spiritual qualities to educate, protect, and heal people, as well as to perform religious rituals. After the adoption of Islam, Turkic shamans integrated Islamic elements into their practices while continuing to exercise their shamanic qualities. Since shamanic abilities were not acquired through education or appointment by a ruler but were seen as a gift from God, the path to becoming a shaman was a complex one. Today, shamans continue their activities under the titles of "healers" or "tauyps."

The **Great Silk Road** facilitated the introduction of various beliefs and world religions into the Turkic steppes. However, none of these, including Islam, gained a firm foothold among the Turkic peoples without adapting. The abundance of divine elements in Turkic beliefs that did not contradict Islamic principles, but instead complemented them and contributed to spiritual development, contributed to the rapid acceptance

of Islam by the Turkic peoples. This was primarily due to the similarity between the concept of the Absolute Spirit in both belief systems.

According to the prominent Kazakh philosopher M.S. Orynbekov, the attempt by Eastern Turks to assimilate into the global cultural space positively influenced the pace at which Islam spread. The new religion provided a unifying framework during the decline of archaic traditional beliefs, reflecting the needs of a developing medieval society in the East (Orynbekov, 2000, 9).

Islam spread among the Turkic peoples in its **Sufi form**, which boldly incorporated other Turkic beliefs, including elements of Tengrism. Ch. Valikhanov wrote, *"The religion of Muhammad merged Tengrism and Islam, preserving the belief in Tengri and ancient religious elements"* (Valikhanov, 1984, 210). Sufism allowed for the inclusion of various concepts, worldviews, and elements of older beliefs, philosophies, and religious traditions adopted by different segments of society. With its ability to adapt, Sufism created an appealing image of Islam during the medieval period (Nurtazina, 2001, 153). For this reason, compared to contemporary Islamic-Protestant movements such as Wahhabism and Salafism, the form of Islam practiced by the Turkic peoples can be described as **"folk Islam."**

### Ecological Culture and Education in Kazakhstan

Elements of ecological culture, deeply rooted in nature, are effectively utilized to address modern environmental challenges in Kazakhstan and to promote ecological awareness among youth.

For example, in 1998, in alignment with the priorities of the **"Long-term Development Strategy of the Republic of Kazakhstan until 2030"**, the government adopted the **Concept of Environmental Education**, jointly developed by the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Protection. This document outlined the goals, objectives, and main directions for developing and implementing environmentally significant national educational projects.

To strengthen the reform of environmental education in the country, several programs were developed and approved, including:

- **"National Strategy for Environmental Education and Training in the Republic of Kazakhstan"** (1998),
- **"Environmental Education Program"** (1999),
- **"Concept of Environmental Safety of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2004–2015"** (2003), among others.

Since 2008, **Ecology** has been introduced as a mandatory discipline for students in higher and secondary specialized educational institutions, later expanded to **"Ecology and Sustainable Development"** in 2011. Additionally, disciplines such as **"Agroecology"** have been implemented to train ecologists, as well as bachelor's and master's degree students specializing in environmental fields (Nurgabylova, 2018, 60).

These efforts underscore the role of environmental education in cultivating a new generation of specialists capable of addressing ecological issues while fostering a culture of sustainability in Kazakhstan.

By Presidential Decree No. 577 of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated May 30, 2013, the **"Concept for Kazakhstan's Transition to a Green Economy"** was approved. This concept was supported by the **"Action Plan for the Implementation of the Concept for Kazakhstan's Transition to a Green Economy for 2013–2020."** According to the concept, one of the six principles of transitioning to a "green economy" is the **"education and development of environmental awareness in business and among the population."** It emphasizes the need to improve existing and develop new educational programs on the rational use of natural resources and environmental protection within the education and workforce training systems (Zhilbaev & Moiseyeva, 2016, 15).

Thus, leveraging the spiritual potential of the ecological culture embedded in the traditional worldview of the Turkic peoples is in its formative stage. Scholars and intellectuals, in response to the growing ecological challenges in the world and the region, have actively begun collaborating with the governments of Turkic states to study and promote the ecological aspects of the traditional Turkic worldview.

## Recommendations

Based on the study's results, the following recommendations are proposed: Considering the spiritual, cultural, and ideological connection between the traditional Turkic worldview and the environment, it is essential to conduct a comprehensive study of the Turkic traditional religion. Collaborative international projects should be developed with the involvement of researchers specializing in the Turkic worldview and environmental protection organizations. Efforts should be made to promote and popularize the ecological aspects of the Turkic worldview through scientific publications, mass media, and social networks.

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