Disenchantment With the Past and Identity Crisis: The Origins of Secularism in the Muslim-Populated Territories of the South Caucasus

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This research paper seeks to explore the history of secularism in the Muslim-populated territories of the South Caucasus region, more specifically, the circumstances and the conditions under which the first intelligentsia emerged as a new social phenomenon in the mid-nineteenth century.[i] The paper also considers the role of the intelligentsia and enlightenment within the context of imperial and Muslim intellectual history. Moreover, it traces the origins of secularism in the Muslim world to the nineteenth-century intelligentsia in the South Caucasus region.

Before presenting the agenda of the intelligentsia and the origins of secularism, it is worthwhile to elaborate on the intellectual environment in Tiflis – the administrative and cultural center of the Caucasus region – during the early decades of the nineteenth century.[ii]

In the Caucasus – a region between the Orthodox Christian Russian Empire, the Sunni Ottoman Empire, and Shia Iran – the nineteenth century started with the Russian invasion. After the annexation of Eastern Georgia, in 1801, the Caucasus Viceroyalty (Кавказское наместничество) was established in Tiflis, and in the following years as a result of the wars with the Ottoman Empire and Qajar Iran, the rest of the Caucasus region was also annexed into the territories of the Russian Empire. Soon after the Russian invasion, as Tiflis had

become the administrative and cultural center of the Caucasus region, a group of Russians with various political inclinations started to settle in this area, and newly established Russian schools began to influence the young generation of the local population. This young generation schooled in the Russian language began to recognize and learn about European thinkers, taking advantage of the mixed intellectual environment of Tiflis. Above all, the ideas of liberty and democracy that emerged in Europe had a very considerable influence on these young intellectuals.[iii] However, the influence of modernist Russian intellectuals inspired by Western thought was not accepted unanimously by the local Muslim intellectuals. There were three main reactions by three different groups of intellectuals: a group of highly conservative intellectuals was openly hostile to new ideas, altogether rejecting Western thought[iv]; some members of the intelligentsia embraced progressive Western thought, partially (in some cases wholly) refuting the existing religion and culture; and the third group of intellectuals developed a synthesized ideology borrowing some ideas both from the European and Oriental intellectual traditions. This last moderate view was the most popular, especially among the young Muslim population that adopted reformist thinking and those in Russian military service.[v] Therefore, the focus of this paper will be on this third group of intellectuals.

The young secular Muslim intellectuals who were influenced by the intellectual environment of Tiflis started to be actively involved in spreading progressive Western ideologies among their predominantly Muslim-populated homelands. One of the peculiarities of this group was that, unlike the intellectual critics of religion in the region (the broader Middle East in general), they did not propose a new religious sect or belief as a response to the existing dominant religious mainstream. If we look at the history of religious sects in Iran or even in India, we can see a general tendency that after destroying

the hegemony of the previous clerics, the emerging intellectual elite would fill the gap by creating their own religious cult and attracting new followers. In the case of Muslim intelligentsia of the South Caucasus, a major consequence of the rivalry with clerics was the creation of a progressive, strongly secular movement that defined the identity of the intelligentsia. What also distinguished the Muslim intelligentsia, or the Enlightenment Movement *(Maarifçilik Hərəkatı)*, of the South Caucasus was that they openly advocated secularism using all the possible means of education and newly emerging print media.

Today, the majority of the Azerbaijani historians believe that the *Enlightenment Movement* of the nineteenth century played a decisive role in the formation of Azerbaijani national identity (or "national consciousness," as they put it). This opinion is also shared by foreign historians who work on the Azerbaijani intelligentsia. It was indeed during that time that the issues of language and identity became the subject of public debates for the first time.

Although I agree with this suggestion that identity and language questions were inseparable parts of those debates, I would argue that Azerbaijani identity is firmly intertwined with the idea of secularism. In these debates, Azerbaijani identity was firmly intertwined with the idea of secularism. Its first signs go back to the first half of the nineteenth century when a group of *madrasa* (religious schools within mosques) teachers independently started to bring social issues into public discussions. Needless to say, "intelligentsia" may not be an accurate term to describe this group of intellectuals at this early date, but what they achieved was extremely important since they managed to convince the young generation to pursue secular education, which was a conducive factor to break with the traditional way of thinking. For instance, it was Mirza Shafi Vazeh who persuaded Mirza Fatali Akhundov to continue his education at a secular school, although Vazeh was teaching at a *madrasa*, a religious school.

It was one of the most interesting trends that madrasa teachers who were religious by cultural inclination (and by profession) displayed an enormous amount of courage to go against the conventional educational system and propagate secular education.

Speaking of the existing historiography, it must be noted that there are only a few works in English or Russian, while the majority of the secondary literature is in Azerbaijani. Between these two schools of scholarship – in the local language and foreign languages – there is a striking difference both in methodology and rhetoric. To make things more complicated, even in the national historiography *per se*, there is a serious divergence. For instance, there are two mainstream approaches to reassess the *Enlightenment Movement* of the late nineteenth century. On the one hand, according to the broader group of historians, "all cultural-educational projects were financed and supported by the national entrepreneurs and intelligentsia who sacrificed a lot for the future of the nation."[vi] This claim, besides being overly populist, is less explanatory as it over-romanticizes the role of the intelligentsia and disregards the real motives behind the involvement of the oil barons. On the other hand, according to another group of historians, the abovementioned cultural revival was possible thanks to the financial interests of the entrepreneurs, and therefore, national sentiments and a sense of civic duty had little to do with their agenda. This claim is also not immune to criticism since it ignores the bilateral relations (in some cases, it was indeed a close friendship, besides being a business partnership) between oil barons and the intelligentsia, and therefore fails to reflect the nature of the cooperation between the two. It would be fair to say that, by the early twentieth century, national sentiments were increasingly strong among Turkic-speaking Muslims, whereas among other nationalities in Baku political activism was more evident. The situation in Baku became more intense by the time of the

chaotic events (ethnic clashes, labor protests) of 1905. Considering both the complexity of the times, which saw a wave of nationalism, and the peculiarities of the Baku oil industry, I think a possible solution to this dilemma could probably be the amalgamation of both arguments by focusing on case studies of the most prominent oil barons and intellectuals. Since the role of Baku oil barons both in the cultural revival and the national awakening deserves an separate study, it should suffice to specify that the cooperation between the intelligentsia and the oil barons was a sort of modernization project, a response to Imperial rule that later gained political significance.

To continue the discussion of the historiography, it would be useful to draw attention to another subject that is equally intriguing – the role of the secular intelligentsia in transforming the local communities in the Muslim-populated territories of the South Caucasus region. One of the most prominent Azerbaijani historians, Jamil Hasanli, mentions in his book that "in fact, on the eve of the First Russian Revolution, through the revolution years and the subsequent periods, the Muslims of the Caucasus gradually shifted from the Islamic community (*Ummah*) to Turkic nationalism, which by contrast to the pan-Islamism and pan-Turkism promoted the process of self-awareness on a regional basis."[vii] In his understanding, the most significant achievement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century intelligentsia was that they promoted national identity on the basis of ethnicity, not religion. Historian Altay Goyushov, who is widely acknowledged for his work on the history of Islam in Azerbaijan, argued that "[…] under 19th-century Russian rule, Muslim-majority Azerbaijan underwent a period of rapid modernization. Operating in a relatively free environment, Azerbaijan's pre-revolutionary intelligentsia successfully integrated secular, liberal values into their country's national identity, reconciling the fragmented Sunni and Shia populations of the South Caucasus."[viii] According to Goyushov, the reason that the

Azerbaijani intelligentsia strongly supported secularism was the Sunni-Shia division in the society, and therefore, as the religion did not offer the necessary elements for cohesion, it could not serve as a unifying factor.

Without exception, in the scholarly works that were published during the Soviet times, there was a tendency to present the religious beliefs of the nineteenth-century intellectuals from the perspective of Soviet state ideology. There were two different attitudes towards secular (in most cases, they referred to them as "materialist-atheist thinkers") and religious intellectuals. For example, Akhundov and Vazeh were canonized, and their greatness as thinkers was justified (often exaggerated) with their critical attitude towards religion. One such example can be found in Kamran Mammadov's book in which he says that "by no means can Vazeh be compared to Bakikhanov, Zakir, Shakir, and others, for Vazeh acted more boldly against religion".[ix] Similar statements made by various historians often glorify Akhundov as the founder of atheism or even materialist ideology in the Muslim world. This firmly held view could only be contested outside the Soviet academic environment.[x]

Defining the Azerbaijani intelligentsia and categorizing them into respective groups is also a challenging task that is worth tackling. Historian Firouzeh Mostashari defines the first group of intelligentsia as such: "The first generation of the intelligentsia was inadvertently created by the policies of viceroy Vorontsov, who employed the Azerbaijanis in the military and civil service as translators and bureaucrats."[xi] Then she continues that "the second generation of intelligentsia unlike the first, was the graduates of Russian universities who were employed as teachers and journalists."[xii] As for the third generation of the intelligentsia, the author claims that, "the political views of the third generation of the Azerbaijani intelligentsia were

diverse and spanned the entire ideological spectrum, reflecting Azerbaijan's pivotal position among three major civilizations." Although I agree that the profiles of Abbasgulu agha Bakikhanov and Mirza Fatali Akhundov definitely fit into the first category since both of them served in the Russian army and worked for public offices as translators, this categorization risks being a generalization since it disregards the major difference between their intellectual outlooks and religious inclinations. Moreover, another shortcoming of this categorization of the intelligentsia is that it downplays the role of the tensions between the clergy and the intelligentsia, who were in a constant rivalry to become the most respected social group. In addition to that, I would argue that the author overlooks the diverse backgrounds (such as varying social and, to some degree, political backgrounds) of the intelligentsia and somehow overestimates the role of Russian colonial officers in creating the local intelligentsia.

Speaking of the clergy, *mollas* (teachers) at *madrasas* (religious school) should be given particular attention since both the definition and the role of this group needs to be studied thoroughly.[xiii] It is an open question whether the teachers at religious schools should be considered part of the clerical class or intellectuals. Although at first glance, it may seem that *mollas* by religious inclination belonged to the clergy, a close reading of the available accounts and individual cases tells a different story. Therefore, to have a clear definition of the clergy as a class it is important to identify the intelligentsia and to see the divisions between these two groups. The members of the first Azerbaijani intelligentsia received their education at the *madrasas*, and most of them came from upper-class religious families. Among the Muslim intellectuals, only those who later received a secular education became members of the intelligentsia. In the existing historiography it is problematic that some historians include *ulamas* – religious scholars and clerics of the upper

class – in the group of intellectuals. It seems to me that one possible reason for this ambiguity is related to the translation issue.

Although both the *mollas* and the intelligentsia were part of the education system, they had serious conflicts of interest and, most importantly, two distinct approaches to education. Therefore, to say that "clerics played a decisive role in public education in the nineteenth century," there should be at least some sort of cooperation between them and intelligentsia, which was not the case. The lack of this cooperation can be proved by giving examples from articles that were published at the time. For instance, in their articles and letters, Zardabi, Akhundov, and several other intellectuals repeatedly complained about clerics who used various methods to hinder the activities of secular schools and publishing houses, calling both of these innovations "against Islam." In an article published in *Akinchi*, Zardabi expressed his dissatisfaction with the *mollas* who publicly "called the *enlighteners (maarifçilər)* infidels and by all possible means hindered their activities."[xiv] We can see similar complaints in the letter Seyid Azim Shirvani sent to Akhundov, in which he talked about the obstacles created by the *mollas*.[xv] In light of these articles, it can be easily said that it was not the clerics who supported the intelligentsia in their causes, but the industrialists – more specifically the oil barons who accumulated a vast amount of money and power that enabled them to invest in wide scale educational and cultural projects.

It should be noted that intelligentsia's strong loyalty to secularism can be traced back to the early nineteenth century intellectuals. It is safe to argue that the intellectuals of the early nineteenth century were as important as the more famous intelligentsia of the late nineteenth century since the first signs of secularism were introduced by the former.

Here one may ask why a new group of intellectuals – the intelligentsia – who were so different from their predecessors, had better opportunities to create their own following and areas of influence. This phenomenon can be explained within the context of a series of events that occurred abroad and their extensions on the domestic situation. At that time, Iran was significantly less influential than in previous years, which in turn created a sort of gap that later, especially starting from the 1830s, was filled with the new wave of ideological movements coming indirectly from Europe through Russia. This loose connection with the former intellectual traditions that once were highly influenced by Persians and relative geographical proximity to Western culture was a historically important opportunity to create a genuine local ideology that would serve the needs of the new strata – the intelligentsia.

Conclusion

This research paper is an attempt to combine intellectual history with the history of religion by bringing them into the orbit of the overlapping characteristics of each sub-discipline. To reach its goal, the main question that this paper seeks to answer is why in a predominantly Muslim society, not religion, but secularism played a unifying role and why the targeting of religion by intellectuals brought identity issues into intellectual debates. In the case of the newly emerged intelligentsia, defending secularism was an opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty to the Russian government, through which they eventually created their own following and challenged authority. The intelligentsia had its own intellectual resistance against colonial rule through creating a hybrid identity and a new cult. One may expect that perhaps religion was the main tool in their endeavor, but surprisingly for intellectuals, religion was not a tool for their cause but a target of criticism. On the other hand, in Azerbaijan, the traditional aristocracy had a deep sympathy to the Iranian state, yet some of its members, who were loyal

Russian servants, embraced the Russian part of their identity, and praised the "Civilizing Mission" of the Empire, did not think that religion had a place in politics. Perhaps that was the first sign of secular ideas among the Muslim populations in the South Caucasus. This traditional unique form of secularism today still has its traces in Azerbaijani society and politics.

References

[i] The majority of those areas in the Muslim-populated territories of the South Caucasus today is within the Azerbaijani Republic, expcept the major cities such as Tiflis and Yerevan. Therefore, for the sake of historical and geographical accuracy, instead of calling the secular intelligentsia of the nineteenth century the Azerbaijani intelligentsia, which I believe is still an appropriate term to use, I prefer to use a rather long term – the secular intelligentsia in the Muslim territories of the South Caucausus – with the belief that for the reader it will be more explicit.

[ii] The city was called Tiflis at that time and only after the decree by the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet Union on August 17, 1936 it was renamed Tbilisi.

[iii] This young generation of intellectuals were mostly first generation of locals that served in the Russian army and public offices.

[iv] This group of intellectuals was mostly centered in cities like Shamakhi and Shusha. For more see ənvər Çingizoğlu, *Qarabağda Maarif: 1750-1950* [Education in Karabakh]. Baku, 2013.

[v] Mirza Fatali Akhundov was perhaps the most famous intellectual who served in the Russian army.

[vi] This exact line can be found in almost all popular history books and school books as well. For more, see Manaf Süleymanov, *Azərbaycan Milyonçuları: Hacı Zeynalabdin Tağıyev* [Azerbaijani millionaires: Haji Zeynalabdin Taghiyev], (Ganclik, Baku, 1995), Fərhad Cabbarov *Haci Zeynal Abdin Tağıyevin qız məktəbinin tarixindən* [On the History of Taghiyev's Girls' School], Baku, 2011.

[vii] See Hasanli's article http://www.russkiivopros.com/?pag=one&id=701&kat=8&csl=79.

[viii] See Goyushov's brief comment on: http://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/2014%E2%80%932015-Reagan-Fascell-Democracy-Fellows-Newsletter.pdf

[ix] Kamran Məmmədov, *XIX əsr Azərbaycan ədəbiyyatında satira (Satire in 19th century Azerbaijani literature),* Baku, 1975, 182.

[x] See the interview of Mammad Amin Rasulzadeh which first appeared on Radio Liberty and was then published as an article in the newspaper "Azadliq" in 1955.

[xi] Mostashari, Firouzeh. *On the Religious Frontier: Tsarist Russia and Islam in the Caucasus* (International Library of Historical Studies), 2006, 129.

[xii] Ibid.

[xiii] In the Azerbaijan State History Archive, documents related to education in the nineteenth century are stored in Fund number 312 and Fund number 308. In addition to this, some documents are kept in Fund No. 372.

[xiv] Akinchi, n 5, May 1877

[xv] Azerbaijan National Academy of Science, Institute of Manuscripts named after Fuzuli. Şirvaninin Axundova məktubu [Shirvani’s letter to Akhundov].