

Islam and Youth in Azerbaijan

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After the collapse of communist ideologies and regimes, a serious transformation of the values of society have taken place in most countries of the world that gained independence. The obvious result of this was the process of mass return to national and religious values, which have ancient historical roots. Azerbaijan is not an exception in this respect either. For 70 years, independence was harshly suppressed by atheistic and collectivist ideology. The first years of independence in Azerbaijan were marked by the emergence of the national ideology, based on the dominance of the titular ethnos and the acquisition by religion of the relevance among different groups of society, to the forefront. However, this trend manifested itself not only in the revival of the religious values of Islam, to which the majority of the population belongs. In addition, on the one hand, non-Islamic denominations, which historically existed in the territory of the country, became more active, and on the other hand “non-traditional” denominations alien to this geographical territory began to spread, which was due to the opening of the country’s borders.

Only 18 registered mosques and 53 registered religious communities (including non-Islamic ones) were in Azerbaijan in 1985. In addition, during this period there were 25 communities that were not mosques, including 1 Baptist community, 3 synagogues, 3 Orthodox and 2 Armenian churches, many sanctuaries and feasts. Only 123 officially operating religious figures were in 1982. In the 80 years of the XX century, only 2-3 people had the opportunity to go to Hajj (to make a pilgrimage) in Azerbaijan with great risk. In the first year of independence, there were 16 persons with religious education in the country. All of them worked in the Caucasus Muslims Board. These people were educated mainly in the madrasah “Mir Arab” in Bukhara and Tashkent Islamic

University[\[i\]](#).

Tadeusz Swietochowski investigated religiousness in Azerbaijan in the Soviet period and noted that during this period the public manifestations of religiosity were almost completely limited. However, despite this, the Shiite faith was widespread among the majority of the population, and the manifestations of religiosity became "takiyya". According to the principle of "takiyya", a Muslim can hide his religious faith and, moreover, may even for a while refrain from external manifestations of religiosity, if there is a threat or danger to the life of a Muslim.[\[ii\]](#) The principle of "takiyya" is really widespread in the Shia faith of Islam. However, Swietochowski's idea that in Azerbaijan of the Soviet period such a principle played a key role for the Shiite majority in the preservation of religiosity seems to be groundless. As we know, atheistic ideology was introduced by Communists on a total basis. As a result, it can be said that religiosity has receded into the background in almost all countries of the communist camp, regardless of whether it is Christian or Muslim. And after the cancellation of the atheist ideology, religion to some extent again returned to public life in all these countries. It is for this reason that it is not possible to substantiate both empirically and theoretically the relationship of this trend with the Shiite concept of "takiyya" in Azerbaijan.[\[iii\]](#)

After gaining independence, the number of mosques in Azerbaijan increases every year. Preference was given to the restoration of old mosques, but new mosques are built in mass order. Funding is provided from sources of private donations, through government agencies and foreign funds. Over a thousand old and closed mosques in the Soviet era are opened and restored again thanks to donations, about one hundred mosques were built with the help of foreign funding.[\[iv\]](#)

There are 2166 mosques in the country today, 136 of them are in the city of Baku. There are 13 churches and 7 synagogues,

dozens of non-Islamic religious communities in the territory of the country. Strengthening the relevance of religion manifests itself in increasing the number of prayer houses, and in changing people's attitudes toward religion. The importance of religion in the system of social relations is great. To study the direction of the future development of religion, it is necessary to determine the role and place of youth in the process of its actualization.

Data and methodology

First of all, it should be noted that this article aims to provide an exclusively expository (descriptive) analysis of the place and role of religion, in particular Islam, in public processes in Azerbaijan. Taking into account the volume of the article, this goal provides proof of a specific hypothesis and, therefore, secondary data were used in the analysis (secondary data).

The definition of the level of religiosity and the role of religion in Azerbaijan's socio-political relations is the goal of a few existing quantitative studies of high representativeness. In 2011 and 2014, the Center for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan (jointly with the Center for Religious Studies) conducted a public opinion poll with the same purpose under the title "Islam in Azerbaijan". When considering the role of Azerbaijanis in the hierarchy of collective identity, especially religious identity, the reference in the article is partially made on the results of the 2011 survey.

In addition, there are also survey data that were conducted by the Center for Religious Studies of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2001 and 2006.

The most important poll in this area is the "Caucasus Barometer", which contains the initial version of the data. It was conducted in 2008-2013 by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers in order to study public opinion on socio-economic

issues and political activities in Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia. The “Caucasus barometer” includes issues that allow us to determine the place of religion in public relations in each of the three countries.

Religious diversity and religiosity in Azerbaijan.

The definition of the religious structure of the population living in Azerbaijan seems rather complicated. This is due to the fact that issues related to the religious affiliation of people are not included in the census conducted in the country every ten years. For this reason, this or that religious affiliation of people, expressed in statistical data, is conditional and is determined for the most part on the basis of ethnicity. According to rough estimates, more than 96% of the population are Muslims.[\[v\]](#) Most of the remaining 4% of the population are Orthodox, adherents of the Armenian Apostolic Church (mainly living in the occupied territories of Azerbaijan), Jews, adherents of various Protestant sects, Bahá'ís, Hare Krishnas, Catholics and others. As you can see, the biggest group after Muslims are Christians. After the start of the re-registration process (01.09.2009) 760 religious entities were registered in the country. From the confessional point of view, 732 of them belong to Islamic religious entities, and 28 of them are non-Islamic. [\[vi\]](#)

Also, according to rough estimates, Shiites constitute 60-65% of the Muslim population, and Sunnis – 35-40%. The Shiites, who represent the majority in the country, belong to the branch of Isnaasharit (supporters of Imam Shiism, who recognize with their spiritual leaders 12 Imams of this movement). Shiite is widespread in the southern, central and western regions of Azerbaijan, as well as in Baku and surrounding villages. Shiites make up the majority of the population of such large cities as Baku, Ganja, Sumgayit, Mingachevir.

Two main branches of Sunnism are historically distributed in

Azerbaijan. Shafi'i and Hanafi. Since 1993, after gaining independence, Hanbalism has been spreading in Azerbaijan, along with ideological Salafism, due to the massive influx of religious emissaries and propagandists from the Persian Gulf countries under the guise of humanitarian organizations and religious figures educated in these countries and who later returned to Azerbaijan. The country has preserved and strengthened its foundations the Hanafi madhhab, the reason for which are strong economic and political relations with Turkey. The Shafi'i same madhhab, traditional for the northern regions of the republic, is relatively weakened, as a result of the fact that it did not receive political support. If you pay attention to the geography of the spread of Salafism, which is attributed to the Khanbalit legal madhhab, then it is not difficult to see that it is mainly spread in the northern regions, which historically belong to the Shafi'i madhhab. However, it should be noted that Salafism is gaining many followers also in the Nagorno-Shirvan region, which for centuries has been the main center of Hanafi Sunnism in Azerbaijan.

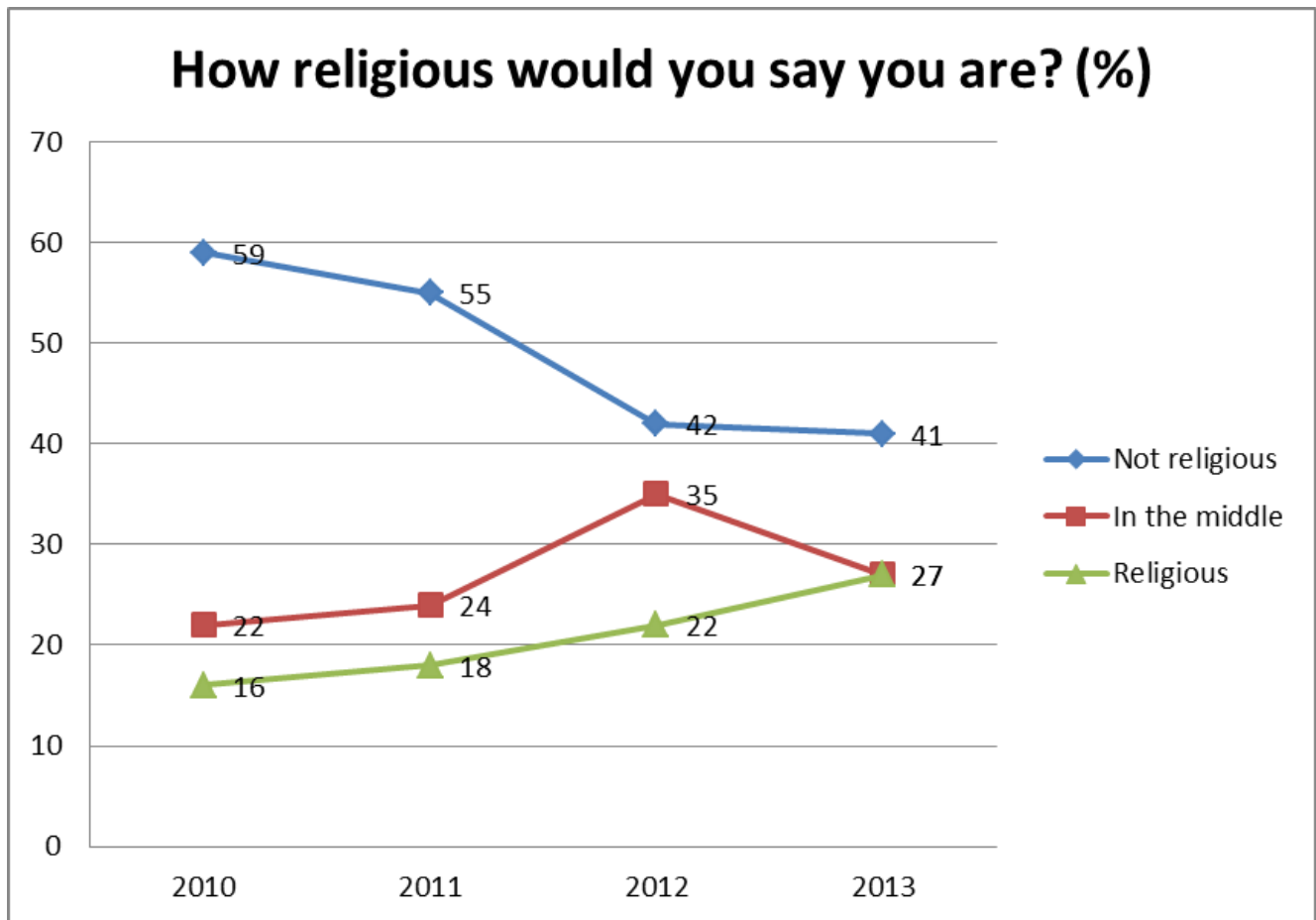
Intelligent-mystical Gnosticism, which was widely spread in the Irfan-Sufi schools, began to spread widely in Azerbaijan, beginning with the XI century. Therefore, it is no coincidence that in the Middle Ages the Irfan scholars and followers of the Sufi tariqa (community) formed the core of the religious and intellectual elite of Azerbaijan. In the modern period, the followers of these tasawwuf schools practically do not occur in the country, despite the fact that in Azerbaijan there are historical roots of such tariqa as Suhrawardiya, Hurufiya, Safavia, Khalvatiya, Naqshbandiya, Nimatullahiya belonging to both Shiite and Sunni madhhabs. Only a few followers of the Nigariya movement of Naqshbandiya-Khalidiya tariqa can still be found only among the descendants of the Gubadli and Djabrail regions of Azerbaijan occupied by the Armenian armed forces after 1992, as well as in the Barda, Cuba and Gazakh regions.

However, among these followers there are also no Murid-Murshid relations (attitudes of a mentor and a disciple) and Tekkin Sufism (a place of worship and solitude). Shaykh Nasukh Efendi, belonging to the movement Khalidiy, acted in the village of Mukhakh of Zagatala district during the Soviet era. He died in 1996. Followers of the Shazili and Naqshbandi Sheikh Said Afandi Chirkeisky can be found in the northern regions of Azerbaijan, which are the place of predominance of the Shafi'i madhhab. However, the nature of the spread of this tariqa also has an ethnic character. Tasawwuf movement were historically widespread and formed the basis of intellectual Islam. However, during 70 years of the Soviet regime, religion in all forms was forced out of public life, and the intellectual religious elite was subjected to repression. All this was one of the main reasons for the weakening of the Tasawwuf movement.

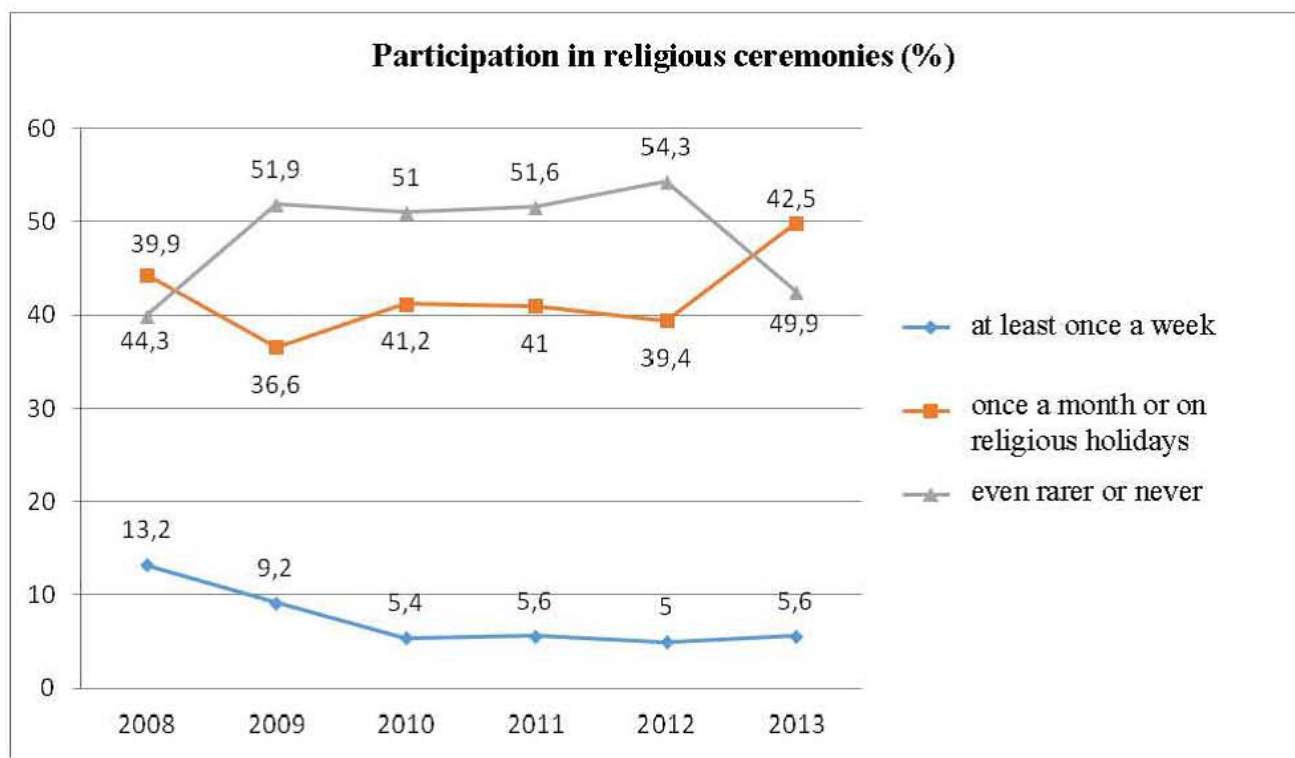
Along with this, it should be noted that the difference between the madhhabs in Azerbaijan is not that serious factor that determines the religious identity among the population. According to the poll conducted by the Center for Sociological Research in 2011, 38.5% of respondents consider themselves as Shiites, and 14% as Sunni. The overwhelming majority (45.9%) do not even equate themselves to any movement of Islam and considers themselves simply Muslims. Almost analogous data we see by the results of the poll for 2014. There is a clear fact that Islamic madhhabs are not a serious factor both at the domestic level in the relations of people with each other, and in the process of self-identification. Ali Abbasov notes that various historical conditions in Azerbaijan show themselves in a peculiar form of the Muslim tradition of the so-called Shiite-Sunni ecumenism[\[viii\]](#). At the same time, it should be emphasized that in this issue that the majority of those who do not equate themselves to any of the branches of Islam and identify themselves as Muslims. This is basically the layer of the population that does not take an active part in the conduct of religious rites. Conversely, the majority among

those who observe all religious dogma are those who identified themselves as adherents of one or another movement. At the same time, in support of the above thesis, it should be stressed once again that there are practically no religious problems between Sunnis and Shiites in Azerbaijan. At the time of the events in Syria and Iraq, almost a defining sign of the war became membership in certain branches of Islam (specifically Sunnism or Shiism). In turn, this was the reason for the short-lived minor unrest among the religious part of the population, which, however, very quickly declined. The general rejection of the actions of IGIL and the ideological work of state bodies and religious leaders allowed to prevent this influence from the very beginning.

Before paying attention to the level of religiosity in Azerbaijan, it should be noted that in the scientific literature two forms of subjective religiosity are distinguished – internal and external. With the inner religiosity of the individual, all his other needs are in harmony with the system of religious convictions and beliefs. The ultimate goal in this case is itself a religion. External religiosity is the transformation of religion into a means of satisfying other human needs. However, such an approach in the identification of religiosity is based solely on the Christian tradition. If you do not go into the methodological problems of applying this approach to societies with a Muslim majority, then you can refer to the “Caucasus barometer” for measuring these two forms of religiosity in Azerbaijan.



The time-series analysis of sociological surveys (time-series analysis) makes it possible to obtain interesting results concerning the dynamics of the level of religiosity in Azerbaijan. When measuring the internal religiosity, the question “How religious are you?” was asked. It is clear from the respondents’ answers that the level of the dynamics of religiosity is developing along the ascending line. During the period from 2010 to 2013, the percentage of respondents who did not consider themselves as religious decreased from 59% up to 41%, while those who consider themselves as religious have increased from 16% up to 27%. However, not all of those who consider themselves to be more or less religious comply with all the dogmas of religion. According to the “Caucasus barometer” surveys, the time-series analysis also proves the level of participation in religious rituals, reflecting the external religiosity.



The percentage of those participating in religious rituals decreased at least once a week from 13.2% in 2008 up to 5.6% in 2013. This indicator determines those, who perform daily prayers, and also visits the mosque at least once a week. On the other hand, according to the State Committee for the Work with Religious Organizations for 2013, no more than 3-3.5% of the citizens of the country who have reached the age of majority come every week to Friday prayer in Azerbaijan's mosque.

In the survey data of the Center for Strategic Studies under the President of Azerbaijan, approximately the same percentages are given. However, the principle of defining religiosity in these data differs slightly from the surveys of the "Caucasus Barometer". Thus, in accordance with the format of the survey of the Center for Strategic Studies, an individual who performs on a regular basis such prescriptions of Islam as Namaz (daily five times prayer) and the month of

Ramadan (an annual post of 1 month) and who refrains from using forbidden foods (alcohol, pork, etc.). It does not take into account whether he visits mosques or collective religious rites on an ongoing basis or performs worship individually. This approach has no less objective justification, given that visiting a mosque is not considered a prerequisite for religiosity. With this approach, percentage data on the religious part of the population, which are contained in the poll of the Center for Strategic Studies, roughly coincide with the percentage of respondents interviewed by "Caucasus barometer", defining themselves as religious. So, according to polls of the Center for Strategic Studies, 28.8% of respondents answered that they perform daily prayer, and 27.3% said that they observe the month of Ramadan every year (another 22.8% answered that they observe, but not every year i.e. "I observe fasting, but not regularly", "I observe as many days as I can withstand").

The following survey data from the Center for Strategic Studies reflects the difference in identifying oneself as a believer or strongly believer and by the actual performance of religious rites. So, an impressive indicator of those believing respondents (32.7%), who in their responses noted that at the moment they do not pray, they "are going to start preparing for it." Every fourth believing respondent (26.7%) does not pray Namaz and does not plan to pray. 7.6% of the faithful respondents used to pray Namaz, but now they do not accomplish it.

Thus, it is possible to identify approximately three identical groups (33 percent each) among believing respondents: a) those who pray Namaz; b) do not pray Namaz, but are going to start it; c) do not pray Namaz, and are not going to start praying.

The survey showed that there are significant differences between "strong-believers" and "believers" in the praying of Namaz: the first category is much more active than the second in the daily prayer (53% and 14.9% respectively).

In order to understand the growth trend of Muslims performing daily rites, we also cite data from the survey of the Center for Religious Studies in 2001. So according to this poll, the number of daily prayers among young people was 9%, and among the older generation 14% (Under the older generation, there is an age group of 30-45 year olds). From this we can conclude that in 10 years this number has almost doubled.

There are various factors that contribute to an increase in internal religiosity and a decrease in the external. Svante Cornell considers five factors affecting the dynamics of religiosity in Azerbaijan:

- 1. The role of religion in everyday life began to increase after the collapse of the Soviet Union with the return of society to normal life. Just like in the US and Turkey, people began to lead their religious lives normally.*
- 2. However, Western values failed to fill the gap in religious identity. Along with them, there was an even more vivid manifestation of conservative social norms, which in Azerbaijan acquired a religious character. Islamic values arose as a reaction to Western values alien to the way of life in Azerbaijan.*
- 3. On the one hand, the occupation of the Azerbaijani territories by Armenia caused the emergence of a national identity and a Muslim identity as an integral part of it. And on the other hand, the public has formed an opinion that the West takes an unfair stand on the conflict and applies double standards to Azerbaijan. In other words, if 20% of Armenia's territory were occupied by Azerbaijan, then the attitude of the West would be different. Thus, it was the Christian West that closed its eyes to the occupation of the territories of Muslim Azerbaijan by Christian Armenia and ethnic cleansing on them.*
- 4. US military operations in Iraq have shaped the opinion of the Shiite majority of Azerbaijanis that the US,*

under the pretext of fighting terrorism, is actually pursuing the goal of punishing Muslims and seizing energy sources. The violence to which the Iraqi population was subjected, especially those living in the holy cities of the Shiites, has led to a shift to the forefront of religious sensitivity.

5. *Islam, as an ideological trend, encourages social justice, condemns corruption, authoritarianism, misgovernment and income inequality. Azerbaijan suffers to some extent from these vices, as a result of which religious sensitivity is further intensified.* [\[viii\]](#)

With the first four reasons from the list of Cornell, which stipulate an increase in religiosity, it is impossible not to agree. With the help of the available empirical evidence available to us, these assertions can neither be dismissed nor confirmed. However, it is possible to verify the last statement empirically.

According to the survey of the “Caucasus barometer of 2013” it becomes obvious that among only 10% of those who consider themselves very religious believe that corruption is the most important problem faced by the country, This figure roughly corresponds to the same indicator for those who do not consider themselves religious – 8% . From this it follows that, at least according to this survey, the correlation between the perception of corruption and the level of religiosity can not be identified.

Table 1. Correlation of the level of religiosity		
	r_(s)	α
The level of democracy in the country today?	.070	.004
Tust to the executive authority	.084	.000
Trust to the parliament	.036	.123
Trust to the court system	.112	.000

According to Cornell, authoritarianism and misgovernment are

factors that influence the rise in the level of religiosity in Azerbaijan. According to the survey of the "Caucasus barometer 2013", bivariate correlation analysis (Spearman) of the variables reflects a weak correlation between the level of religiosity and democracy, trust to the executive, legislative and judicial authorities in the country.

On the example of Azerbaijan it is interesting to consider other theories that try to explain the dynamics of religiosity. Salt and others believe that in countries with high social inequality, the level of religiousness of society is also high.[\[ix\]](#) This happens for two reasons. First of all, according to the theory of deprivation, the religious idea of reward in another world for material difficulties in this world has a relaxing nature for people.[\[x\]](#) On the other hand, by encouraging religiosity on the basis of this idea, an elite with high incomes receives a social control mechanism aimed to accepting by poor men a fate with resignation. According to the theory of "security" Norris and Inglehart, in poor countries there is a high probability that the population will be exposed to existential danger and therefore people howff in religion and God, which causes a high level of religiosity.[\[xi\]](#)

In view of the fact that the Gini index in Azerbaijan was last calculated in 2008, it is impossible to conduct its analysis on the basis of our empirical base. Considering the annual rate of income of the population, one can see in particular that as a result of the increase in oil revenues, per capita income increased from 2378 manats in 2008 to 4,040 in 2013. Thus, the correlation between the increase in internal religiosity and socio-political problems in society is not confirmed by empirical facts.

In our opinion, along with the first four reasons in Cornell's list, external influences are one of the most important factors that have an impact on the dynamics of religiosity. Starting from the first years of independence, active

integration of the country into the global world was also conditioned by frequent visits to Azerbaijan of adherents of various religious and ideological ideologies. The existing religious and ideological gap and the growing spiritual needs of people at first began to be filled and satisfied by religious emissaries who came from different countries, and later also educated in other countries and returned to the country by bearers of unorthodox ideologies for Azerbaijan. Observations in social media show that the majority of people using religious rhetoric, especially young people, are directly influenced by foreign emissaries or persons educated abroad. Below, we will talk in more detail about the sources and agents of religious influences coming from abroad.

A number of issues of external religiosity also require a definite explanation. According to Christian practice, each type of Christianity implies participation in religious rituals, especially in the church. In addition, in Christianity, participation in church life is one of the factors that determine socio-political activity. For example, Verba and others believe that in the US, involvement in church life is strongly encouraged by political bodies [\[xii\]](#). Thus, this form of civic volunteering creates social capital, acting as a guarantor of a kind of network between individuals and institutions. Unlike the church in Christianity, the mosque in most secular Muslim countries, especially in Muslim post-Soviet countries and Azerbaijan, does not fulfill the function of an institution providing civic participation. If in the Christian world the church is a social institution that also satisfies social needs, then the mosque is more a place of worship. On the other hand, Christians usually perform religious rites in the church. And Muslims do not have to go to the mosque to perform religious rituals. (Except for participation once a week in Friday prayers).

Thus, it is possible to indicate several factors that cause the lag in external religiosity in Azerbaijan. First, in Azerbaijan, since the mid-2000s, significant changes have

occurred in improving the well-being of people. The poverty rate in the country decreased from 40.2% in 2004 to 5% in 2015. As noted above, over the years, there has been a significant increase in the population's income. According to the theory of "existential security", which is one of the functional approaches to secularization, people in poor countries are constantly facing a danger to life. They suffer from hunger and disease, remain helpless before natural disasters, foreign occupation, internal conflicts. The limited resources of the state are not able to protect the population from such dangers. In the process of social and economic development of the country, improvement of living conditions and provision of vital conditions by the state reduces life risks and uncertainty. According to this theory, on the one hand, people in front of such risks find consolation in religion, and on the other hand, it is the institutional religion that offers material goods and social services, at least, at a minimum. On the one hand, people turn to the church facing life risks in order to find refuge in God, and on the other hand to enlist his help. In industrial and post-industrial societies, the state acts as a guarantor of well-being, i.e. an average estate with a stable way of life and work is formed. The Church, as a guarantor of security, recedes into the background. Because of this, in modern rich societies, religiosity decreases.[\[xxiii\]](#) In our opinion, significant progress over the last decade in the well-being of society in Azerbaijan is also one of the reasons for the decline in the dynamics of external religiosity.

Another reason for the lag in external religiosity is that Islam in Azerbaijan is in the exclusive monopoly of a single structure. Article 9 of the Law of the Republic of Azerbaijan "On Freedom of Religion", which forms the legislative basis for state-religious relations, indicates that in the Republic of Azerbaijan religious Islamic entities are united in their historical religious Islamic center – the Caucasus Muslims Board. A hard secular model of the Republic of Azerbaijan

prohibits the accession of religion to political processes. According to the Law "On Freedom of Religion", religious entities do not participate in the activities of political parties and do not provide them with financial assistance. When electing or appointing religious figures to state bodies, their professional religious activity and activities as a religious figure are suspended for the period of their tenure. As enshrined in the Constitution of Azerbaijan, in the country religion is separated from the state. The state applies to all religions in the same way. The state-religious relations existing in Azerbaijan correspond to the model of "hard secularism" (another model of secularism is "passive secularism"). Ahmed Kuru notes that the state forces religion out of the public sphere into private life in countries where the policy of "hard secularism" is being conducted.[\[xiv\]](#)

But on the other hand, the state provides financial assistance to religious entities. Such assistance is provided through the Caucasus Muslims Board, as well as by the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations, the body that ensures the implementation of the state's religious policy. In 2011, the Cabinet of Ministers, by its order, allocated funds to the Caucasus Muslims Board in the amount of 2 million manat (the equivalent of 2.5 million US dollars). The state's assistance to both Islamic and non-Islamic religious entities is periodic. From the President's Reserve Fund, the Caucasus Muslims Board has been allocated funds to support religious entities in the amount of 3 million manat in 2015, 1 million manat in 2016, 3 million manat in 2017 and 4 million manat in 2018.

Secularization explains the theory of the "economy of religion", according to which religious behavior, based on rational choice, should be analyzed at the level of the individual, group and market.

Proceeding from this theory, in societies in which pluralism of religious entities and denominations is widely developed,

such denominations create market competition more often in order to attract supporters.

The “religious market” acts on the basis of supply and demand and develops in the absence of outside interference, and this, in turn, leads to an increase in the number of participants in church congregations[\[xv\]](#).

With the help of empirical research, Stark and Finke argue that market inefficiency is formed in societies in which, due to the lack of market competition, denominations are lazy and a single denomination dominates due to state control and subsidies.[\[xvi\]](#) The decline in the level of external religiosity in the country is due to the fact that in Azerbaijan the Islamic religion is legally located in the monopoly of a single institutional center and state subsidies are directed also to this center by the policy of strict secularism.

The factor of radical religious groups can be called as another reason for the decrease in the percentage of weekly visiting collective religious rites with respect to the increase in the number of those who perform rituals individually. Unfortunately, in the early years of independence, along with the growing religiosity of the population, radical groups began to appear, which began to involve mostly young people in illegal, radical actions. Groups began to emerge (mostly Salafist lines), recruiting young people to take part in hostilities in the North Caucasus, Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, or even armed groups inside the country that are preparing terrorist attacks. The Ministry of National Security has neutralized several radical religious groups, either already committed crimes (for example, the so-called “Jayshullah”), or created armed groups and preparing for terrorist attacks. According to the data of the Ministry of National Security(MNS) for 2010, more than 200 young people were convicted and served time for such crimes. And finally, in 2008, the same radical groups committed a

terrorist attack in a mosque in Baku, killing and wounding several parishioners. This group was then liquidated completely. As part of the Shiite groups, there were also many young people arrested for espionage in favor of foreign countries. All this led to the fact that the population, and mainly the older generation, began to perceive mosques and religious communities as a threat to young believers, where they could fall under the influence of extremist groups. As a result, young people, partly voluntarily and partly under the influence of elders, stopped attending collective rites and began to perform religious rites only individually.

Islam and Religious Identity

The finding of institutionalized Islam in Azerbaijan aside from political processes is one of the factors that makes the transition to the background of the Muslim identity in the hierarchy of the identity of the country's population. Prior to the beginning of the 20th century, people living in this region identified themselves primarily with Muslim identity, then with ethnicity, geography of residence, etc. (the sequence is conditional). One of the facts confirming this is that the mass massacres committed by Armenians against Azerbaijanis in 1905-1906 remained in collective memory as an "Armenian-Muslim war". Today, citizenship is at the top of the identity ladder. According to a poll conducted by the Center for Strategic Studies in 2011, citizenship, ethnic, religious, regional (place of birth) membership is of great importance in the identity hierarchy for respondents.

The departure of religious identity to the background is primarily due to the advancement of the Soviet citizen and communist identity as a result of the policy of atheism of the Soviet regime. On the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the separatist actions of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, followed by the expulsion of Azerbaijanis from Armenia and the beginning of military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh, were again those events that gave impetus to the national

liberation movement leading to independence. During this period, the forces leading the national liberation movement put forward nationalism, rather than religious rhetoric, on the forefront. Thus, the basis of the liberation movement was not religion, but national-ideological thinking.

Another important reason behind the lagging of the religious identity in Azerbaijan from other identities is that the institutionalized religion did not occupy a special place in the period of the liberation movement, which is the decisive historical moment for the formation of social identity. In April 1989, the religious community “Tovbe” (repentance, return) was formed in Azerbaijan, which played an important role in the social life of the country. The number of his supporters reached several thousand people. However, the organization split in a year, as a result of weak governance. After the events of January 20, 1990, when the Soviet troops defeated the people demanding independence, the harsh reaction of the head of the Caucasus Muslims Department Sheikh-ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade against the Soviet leadership turned him into one of the most influential leaders of socio-political processes. In particular, the authority of Sheikh-ul-Islam increased even more thanks to the organization of the funeral of martyrs under his leadership on January 22, in emergency conditions.[\[xvii\]](#) Nevertheless, in subsequent periods, religious institutions and figures in the socio-political life of the society took a neutral position at best.

<p>Table 2.</p> <p>Identity</p> <p>(%)</p> <p>(5 highest mportance – 1-lowest importance)</p>						
	Identity	1	2	3	4	5

1	Citizenship, to be a citizen of Azerbaijan	1,1	0,5	3,2	16,7	78,5
2	Ethnic identity (Azerbaijani, Lezgin, Tatar and etc.)	1,3	0,6	3,2	17,7	77,2
3	Religious identity (Muslim, Christian and etc.)	2,6	0,8	6,3	20,3	69,9
4	Eropean	35,3	15,1	21,2	11,5	16,9
5	Local (city, town, village of residence)	1,4	4,1	7,1	21,6	65,9
6	Local (city, town, village of birth)	1,0	1,9	6,8	22,4	67,9

For comparison, let us note that, for example, the Catholic Church of Poland was the main supporter of the Solidarność movement (solidarity), which is at the forefront of anti-Soviet resistance. Priest Jerzy Popiushko, who read sermons during the workers' strikes, was killed by the communist regime precisely for its contacts with the Solidarność movement. Today, 64% of Poles believe that it is very important for the Polish identity to be a Catholic and this is the highest among the Catholic countries of Central and Eastern Europe[\[xviii\]](#).

External influences.

In Azerbaijan, external influences on the religious sphere take place in different directions. If in the first years of independence the activity of various funds and organizations from Turkey, Iran, Arab states of the Persian Gulf promoted the revival in the country of the general religious thinking, so in subsequent periods, this led in most cases to the emergence of non-traditional sectarian and radical groups.

One of these unconventional religious movements is Wahhabism, also called Salafism. Wahhabism in Azerbaijan arose through

emissaries who arrived from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the southern regions of Russia (where, it also penetrated from the Arab countries). The spread of Salafism in Azerbaijan is connected with the beginning of activity of the Society for the Revival of the Islamic Heritage of Kuwait since 1994. Already in 2002, there were 61 mosques in the country under the direct leadership of this organization. In 1998, the activity of the Society for the Revival of the Islamic Heritage in Azerbaijan was suspended and its head Sheikh Salim Zakharna was expelled from the country.[\[xix\]](#)

The US government and the UN declared the Islamic Heritage Revival Society a terrorist organization because its branches in Pakistan and Afghanistan were linked to Al Qaeda. According to the sources of various organizations associated with the Kuwaiti government, 73 mosques have been built in Azerbaijan[\[xx\]](#). Most of these mosques were located in the northern regions of Azerbaijan, populated by Sunnis. The Abu Bakr mosque and the Ashur Mosque in Icheri Sheher (Old City of Baku) were operated under the guidance of followers of the Wahhabi movement (at the moment both mosques are closed). Mosques under the direct supervision of the Wahhabis have not remained in recent years, as a result of the struggle against radicalism in the country, but in various mosques Wahhabis are conducting services compactly and in some other mosques they make up the bulk of the attendants.

It is no coincidence that despite the serious struggle of the state with radicalism, approximately 900 people from Azerbaijan, mostly young, joined the radical groups to participate in military operations in Syria and Iraq. Over the past year, citizenship of 54 persons has been revoked, 84 of them have been brought to justice[\[xxi\]](#). It should be noted that according to the amendment to the Law on Citizenship of the Republic of Azerbaijan in 2015, the participation of a citizen of the Republic of Azerbaijan in religious extremist activity or the passing of military training abroad under the pretext of religious education, participation in armed

conflicts in foreign countries under the pretext of spreading religious confessions on the basis of religious hostility or under the pretext of religious rites, or the involvement of others in these conflicts, or the creation armed groups for these purposes leads to a loss of Azerbaijani citizenship.

It should be emphasized that in Azerbaijan, as well as all over the world, Wahhabism, receiving ideological and moral help from abroad, is not a monolithic movement. In the country there are 3 branches of Wahhabism – moderate, takfirist and so-called the Kharijites. There is a tough fight between these branches. In August 2008, against a moderate wing, which was led by Gamet Suleymanov in the Abu Bakr mosque, a terrorist attack was carried out – a hand grenade was thrown at the mosque. As a result of the investigation, it turned out that the terrorist act was committed by the radical group “Forest Brothers”. In the following period, this group was neutralized as a result of joint activities conducted by law enforcement agencies of Azerbaijan and Russia (They were hiding in the forests of Dagestan). And in 2013, there was also a small armed clash between different groups of Salafis in the city of Sumgait, after which all the participants were detained and convicted^[xxii]. Currently, there are mutual accusations in the media between those who are considered moderate and other groups.

One of the external influences on the religious environment in Azerbaijan comes from Iran. For more than five centuries, Shiites in Azerbaijan were the majority, as in Iran. Historically, Azerbaijani Shiites differed by their moderate behavior. We can say that there were no interfaith conflicts in the country. After gaining independence in 1991, as a result of the opening of borders, a large number of young people went to Iran to receive religious education. Most of them went to the city of Qom, which is the educational center of Shiism. They received lessons of “hovza” under the leadership of various influential religious figures of Iran. Starting from this period, various official and unofficial

structures of Iran begin their activity in Azerbaijan. Among them are the Iranian Cultural Center, the Imdad Committee (salvation) of Imam Khomeini (activity in Azerbaijan was suspended in 2014), the Organization of Islamic Propaganda, the representation of Valeyi-Fagih and others. In the 1990s, many clerics from Iran conducted religious rites in the mosques of Azerbaijan, especially in the southern and central regions.

The end of this was the appearance in 1997 of the decree of the President of the country, according to which foreign emissaries were forbidden to conduct religious propaganda. Subsequently, an addition was added to Article 21 of the Law "On Freedom of Religion", according to which, cults and rituals relating to Islam are allowed only to citizens of the Azerbaijan Republic who have been educated in the Republic of Azerbaijan. In 2015, this article was even more stringent – citizens of the Republic of Azerbaijan, who received religious education abroad, were forbidden to conduct cults and rituals relating to Islam.

Over time, individuals who received religious education in Iran began not only to increase their influence on the religious environment of Azerbaijan, but also to carry out social and political activities. The first leader of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, which was established in 1991, and whose state registration was officially abolished in 1995, was arrested on charges of spying for Iran. The last chairman of the party, who illegally continued to work during the following years, was Movsum Samedov, who was educated in Iran. He was arrested on charges of calling for terrorism and forcible seizure of power. The founder of the public association "National-moral values" Abgul Suleymanov, educated in Iran, was the organizer of illegal actions against the ban of hijab in schools. These actions were caused by the introduction in 2011 of the Ministry of Education uniforms in public schools. In the course of the action, there were clashes with the police and wounded people. Finally, in

November 2015, theologian Tale Bagirov was arrested in the village of Nardaran in Baku during an operation conducted by the Ministry of the Interior. The result of the operation was the death of 6 people, including 2 policemen. In 2005-2010 he was educated in the city of Qom. This man was accused of organizing an armed criminal group operating under the guise of religion in planning the violation of socio-political stability in the republic, in an attempt to overthrow the constitutional power.

Concerning the issue of Shiite religious groups, it is necessary to note the question of the ideology of the "vilayeti-fagikh", which, although it originated in Iran and is currently the main state ideology of Iran, has influence on the regions by the Shiites inhabited in other countries. The idea of "vilayeti-fagikh" (Fagikh rule) is the political and religious doctrine put forward by the late Imam Khomeini, which implies that the best form of state government closest to the Islamic tradition is the political structure of the state where the supreme power and supervision of other branches of power is in the hands of "fagikh", that is, the highest cleric, an expert in Islamic jurisprudence (mujtahid). It can be a republic, which is Iran. However, in addition to all the attributes and branches of power inherent in the republican system, lawmaking and the implementation of all laws must be controlled by the supreme clergyman. At the same time, according to the doctrine, to all other things, this "fagikh" is also considered the leader of "all Muslims of the world". Shiism adheres to the doctrine that in matters of rituals one must adhere to the opinion of some now-living mujtahid. Iran uses this position to widely propagandize the supreme spiritual leader of Iran, as the most revered of the living Mujtahids, thereby ensuring that the Shiites recognize the Iranian leader as an authority not only in purely religious ceremonies, but also as a political leader. Since Iran and Azerbaijan have common borders and many Shiites live in Azerbaijan, the propaganda of Iran has achieved some

success. This is reflected in the fact that some Shiites who actively perform religious rituals, including some clerics, local leaders recognize the supreme leader of Iran as a religious authority. At the same time, all the above mentioned persons were from the category that recognized the doctrine of the "vilayeti-fagikh", including the leaders of the Islamic party, who were convicted of espionage or treason. Nevertheless, not all those who recognize the doctrine of "vilayeti-fagikh" are also radical elements, sometimes it is expressed only in support of the Iranian regime and the ideas of the Islamic revolution.

However, among the Azerbaijani Shiite believers, there are many opponents of the Iranian regime and the supreme leader. Some of them adhere to traditional Shiism, and some do so under the influence of Shiite mujtahids and theologians from other countries (in particular from Iraq, Kuwait) who are rivals of the Iranian clergy and conduct propaganda against Iran. In Azerbaijan, supporters of all these areas also compete among themselves, being in a state of conflict and fighting for the minds of the Shiite contingent of believers. Although not officially, it is felt that some state bodies support groups, opponents of the Iranian doctrine, fearing Iran's strengthening.

Having carried out the generalization, it should also be said that this doctrine is interesting only for a small group of believers, the main part, about the performance of individual rituals, does not penetrate into such politically specific aspects.

After gaining independence, historical closeness and family ties with Azerbaijan contributed to strengthening the authority of Turkey. The religious influence of Turkey on the country also begins to increase from the first years of independence. Unlike other outside groups, religious groups and organizations associated with Turkey operated more freely in Azerbaijan.

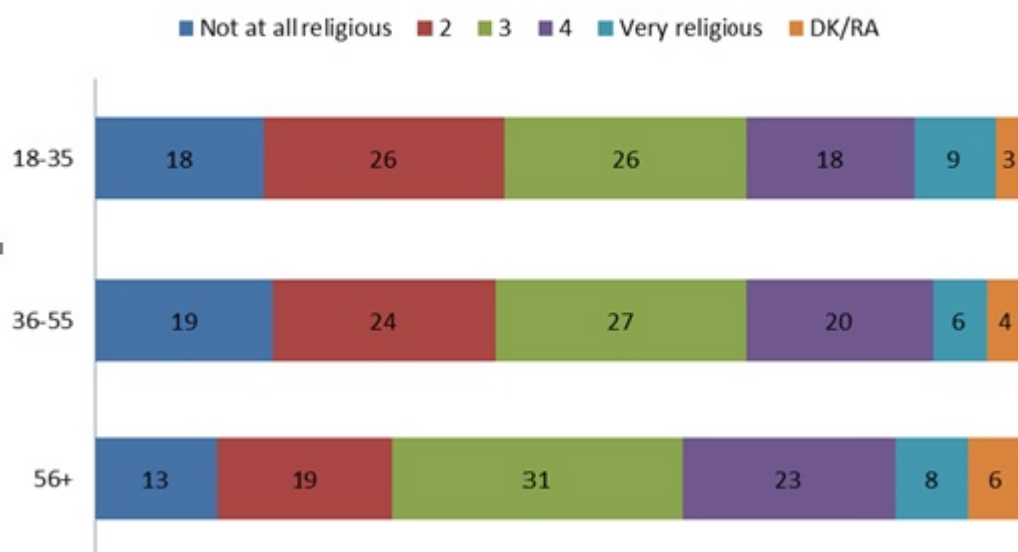
The status of the diplomatic representative authorized for religious issues in Azerbaijan is represented by the representative of the Board of Religious Affairs of Turkey, the official state body of Turkey. In various regions of Azerbaijan, Turkey erected 24 mosques. Along with the Ministry for Religious Affairs, mosques have also been built by the "Youth Assistance Foundation", founded by the well-known sheikh of the Nakshbandi troupe Osman Nuri Topbash. Another sectarian trend, spread from Turkey to Azerbaijan, is "Nurchulug". In the early 20th century, supporters of Said Nursi, residing in Turkey, split into two branches: classical "nursists" or "sungursists" (followers of Mustafa Sungur-a disciple of Said Nursi) and "Gulen jamaat" or "Gulenists" (followers of Fethullah Gülen). If the Sungurs are solely engaged in propaganda, the Gulenists try to infiltrate all spheres of social and political life. By creating modern educational institutions, the Gülenists prepare more influential agents in society. Until the deterioration of relations between the current President of Turkey Rajap Tayyip Erdogan and Fethullah Gulen, the company Chag Oiretim (Modern Education), connected with the Gulen Jamaat, established 10 schools and one university in different regions of the country. This branch of the "Nurchulug" trend created a wide network of business and media in Azerbaijan as well. The ideology of the "Gulenists" was spread through the chain of stationery stores "Nil", the radio station "Burj FM", the newspaper "Zaman", the TV channel "Samanyolu". In 2014, against the backdrop of the deterioration of relations between Erdogan and Gulen, all the structures relating to the "Jamat Gulen" were closed.

Youth and Education

There is no officially functioning religious youth organization in Azerbaijan. Among existing religious entities, associations that have chosen young people as their goal have not been abolished. From the survey of the "Caucasus barometer 2013" it becomes clear that the spread of religiosity in

Azerbaijan by age groups is not significantly different. Only 9% of respondents aged 18-35 said they were very religious.

Distribution of religiosity by age group (%)



Young people are less active in religious rites in comparison with other age groups. According to the results of the survey “Social Capital, Media and Gender in Azerbaijan”, approximately 45% of respondents aged 18-35 declared that they did not participate in religious rituals at all, or participated very little.

It can be seen that the average indicator of religiosity among young people in Azerbaijan is either the same with other age groups, or even lower, which does not correspond to the average statistical indicators of developed countries.

After gaining independence, due to the opening of borders, a large number of young people went to foreign countries to receive religious education. It is estimated that about 3,000 Azerbaijanis have received religious education in Saudi Arabia, Syria, Libya, Egypt, Malaysia and Iran^[xxiii]. Observations show that in recent years this trend has weakened. One of the main reasons for this is the change

introduced in the Law on Freedom of Religion in 2009 and supplemented in 2015. According to this law, persons who have received Islamic religious education abroad can not conduct religious rites and activities as a religious figure. On the other hand, as mentioned above, young people are not so inclined to religion, in view of the fact that religious activity does not provide people with social capital and does not provide vertical mobility in the social structure.

According to the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the public education is secular. As a consequence, state does not establish religious schools. In accordance with the Law "On Freedom of Religion", such a right belongs to religious centers and communities. Religious specialists at the higher education level are trained in the country by the Baku Islamic University and the Faculty of Theology of the Baku State University. If in due time the Baku Islamic University, which since 1992 acts as a university under the Caucasus Muslims Board, had 4 branches, at present only one of them operates. This branch, located in Zagatala, is funded by the "Youth Assistance Foundation" and the Hanafi fiqh is being taught here. During its existence the Baku Islamic University graduated 3550 students, 431 students were sent abroad for education, 319 students are currently studying (data for January 2018). To date, 758 students have graduated from the Faculty of Theology of Baku State University, established with the support of the Foundation for Religious Affairs of Turkey^[xxiv].

10 religious schools are registered with the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations as religious educational institutions. One of them is the madrasah "Shabnam" operating in Baku, which is intended for girls. There are approximately 155 courses of the Quran in the country. According to the law, the Caucasus Muslims Board should give consent to the creation of the Quran courses. Although no official consent was given by the Caucasus Muslims Board to create a course, nevertheless, the current courses were not banned.

Apparently, many people in the country received higher and secondary special religious education. Despite this, the Caucasus Muslims Board is facing problems when appointing a religious figure in 2,250 mosques existing in Azerbaijan. And this is mainly due to the fact that there are no local religious figures in the places of mosques' location, and religious rites are held by people who received religious education abroad.

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