

# The Religious Landscape in Azerbaijan Part I: How Religious Are We?

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## Introduction

From time to time, reports appear in the national press claiming that Azerbaijanis rank among the “least religious peoples in the world.” Similar articles have resurfaced in the media recently. Members of society with different worldviews have reacted to these reports in different ways: Representatives of the secular segment have welcomed them, while religious individuals have questioned the reliability of such information. But what is actually at stake here? Are Azerbaijanis truly so “irreligious”? And if these claims are accurate, how can the current situation—namely, the Azerbaijani population’s seemingly distant attitude toward religion—be explained?

Curiously, when the media seeks to explain these statistical indicators, it is usually theologians or politicians—rather than sociologists—whose opinions are solicited. As a result, at least in popular outlets, the actual picture behind the statistical data that serve as the source of such reports remains largely obscured. In practice, readers are unable to grasp what is really being discussed; instead, they are presented with an incomplete narrative circulated primarily for the sake of sensationalism.

Religiosity and secularization are among the most important issues that sociological theories have sought to explain. Even today, the social sciences encompass a variety of theories concerning the future of religion, secularization, and its possible causes. In the academic literature published on the religious landscape in Azerbaijan, the current situation is

likewise interpreted through one or another of these theoretical frameworks. However, such literature is typically read by a narrow circle of specialists, while the general readership of the aforementioned media reports remains largely unaware of these publications. The primary aim of this article is precisely to bridge this gap.

This two-part article seeks in its first part to illustrate the level of religiosity in Azerbaijan and the extent to which religious worldviews are widespread among the population, drawing on several sets of quantitative data. It also aims to understand, on the basis of survey results conducted in different years, the direction in which attitudes toward religion appear to be changing. As a principal reference, we will use the results of two surveys conducted in different years by the World Values Survey (hereafter WVS) that included Azerbaijan. To gain a clearer overall picture, we will also consider several other studies, the findings of which have been made publicly available. In the second part of the article, we will attempt to explain the current degree of irreligiosity/religiosity from a theoretical perspective—in other words, to assess which of the existing theoretical tools can best account for the observed landscape.

Before proceeding, it should also be noted that recurring claims<sup>[1]</sup> in the Azerbaijani press that the country ranks as the “fifth least religious country in the world” or falls within the “top ten most irreligious countries” are the result of a certain degree of data manipulation. For this reason, the doubts expressed (largely) by the theologians consulted in these reports regarding the accuracy of the cited statistics are not unfounded.

So, what does the picture of religious belief in Azerbaijan actually look like, and how should we read the results of international surveys? To answer this question, we will begin by examining the first set of WVS data that included Azerbaijan.

## The early years of independence

The World Values Survey (WVS) is a sociological survey project that has publicly disseminated the results of quantitative studies conducted in up to one hundred countries since 1981. To date, the findings of seven WVS waves have been published, and the eighth wave is currently ongoing. Azerbaijan was included for the first time in the third wave of the WVS,<sup>[2]</sup> conducted between 1995 and 1998, and for the second time in the sixth wave,<sup>[3]</sup> carried out between 2010 and 2014. The results of these surveys are published on the project's official website separately for each wave and for each country included in that wave.<sup>[4]</sup>

What then does the first (third-wave) WVS survey in Azerbaijan tell us about the level of religiosity? The surveys conducted in Azerbaijan as part of the third wave took place in 1997 and included a total of 2.002 respondents, of whom 49% (981 individuals) were men and 51% (1.021 individuals) were women. Among the religious values the questionnaire sought to measure, one of the most salient questions concerned the "importance of religion." In 1997, a total of 29,5% of Azerbaijani respondents stated that religion was "very important" to them. When responses are disaggregated by gender, it becomes clear that men attributed significantly less importance to religion than women: 33,5% of women, compared to only 25,3% of men, answered "very important" to this question. More than half of respondents (52.5%) selected the option "rather important." Only 3,3% stated that religion was "not important at all," and here, too, a noticeable gender difference emerges: 5,1% of men and only 1,7% of women considered religion to be unimportant.<sup>[5]</sup> The published results also allow for comparisons across age groups. These data show that respondents under the age of 30 (31,2%) and those over 50 (35,1%) tended to regard religion as relatively more important, whereas individuals in the middle age group (30–49)

attributed less importance to religion (26,1%).<sup>[6]</sup>

According to the data, in 1997 only 1,5% of Azerbaijanis reported being active members of a religious community, while 2,8% identified as non-active members. The overwhelming majority of respondents (95,7%) reported no affiliation with any religious community. Among community members, older individuals constituted the largest share: 5.1% of respondents aged over 50 stated that they were active members of religious communities. As expected, there was also a slight gender difference in this indicator in favor of men, with the proportion of male members being marginally higher than that of women.<sup>[7]</sup>

However, when respondents were asked about religious affiliation, 91% stated that they were Muslim, while only 6% reported having no religious affiliation. With regard to participation in religious rituals, only 2,4% of respondents reported attending religious services "more than once a week," 3,2% "once a week," 39,7% "only on special occasions", while 16% stated that they did not participate in religious rituals at all. Although women appear to be more religious than men across nearly all other indicators, men were found to be slightly more active than women in terms of participation in religious rituals. In response to the question "Regardless of whether you practice or not, do you consider yourself religious?", 83,7% of respondents answered affirmatively. A gender gap is also evident here: 81% of men and 86,3% of women described themselves as "religious" ( $p < 0.002$ ). Notably, despite the fact that the survey was conducted only a few years after atheism had lost its de facto status as an official belief system, fewer than 1% of Azerbaijani respondents (0,9%) identified themselves as "convinced atheists." Furthermore, 95,2% of respondents stated that they believed in God, 47% believed in life after death, 60% believed that humans possess a soul, 39,2% believed in the existence of the devil, 48,2% believed in hell, and 50,1%

believed in heaven. When respondents were asked to assess the “importance of God in their lives” on a ten-point scale (1 = not important at all; 10 = very important), nearly 60% (59,3%) rated this importance at the maximum level of ten. In addition, 69,4% of men and 77,2% of women—73,4% of respondents overall—reported that they “find comfort and strength in religion.”<sup>[8]</sup>

In addition, the survey included other questions that help illuminate the significance of religion in the lives of Azerbaijanis during the 1990s. For instance, when respondents were asked to list the “values that should be taught to children at home,” only 18,6% included religion among these values, and of those, merely 5,7% regarded religion as the “most important value” in this respect. The survey also indicates that respondents generally did not perceive cohabitation with people of different religious affiliations as problematic. According to the results, 81,6% of participants stated that they would not be disturbed by living next to neighbors of a different religion. By contrast, when a similar question was asked regarding homosexuals, more than 90% of respondents reported that they would not wish to have them as neighbors.<sup>[9]</sup>

Overall, the results of the 1997 WVS survey conducted in Azerbaijan show—unsurprisingly—that the society was quite conservative with regard to a wide range of issues (family, sexuality, childrearing, and so forth). With respect to the focus of this article, namely attitudes toward religion, the data indicate that during the 1990s the overwhelming majority of Azerbaijanis were believers (in the sense of belief in God) and considered themselves religious, while only a very small proportion identified as non-believers (atheists). However, a closer examination of the data reveals that most Azerbaijanis did not adhere to religious prescriptions (such as performing daily prayers) and, in this sense, were not religious in the conventional, everyday understanding of the term. Moreover, as

observed in many other parts of the world, the phenomenon of women being more religious than men is also reflected in this dataset.

The question that follows is how the religious landscape in Azerbaijani society has changed in the period since these data were collected. To address this, I will now turn to the data published on Azerbaijan as part of the sixth wave of the WVS, as well as the findings of several other studies published in more recent years, in order to assess the current state of religious belief in the country.

### **The current situation**

Within the framework of the sixth wave of the WVS project, surveys in Azerbaijan were conducted in 2011, with a total of 1,002 respondents, including 495 men and 507 women. In this wave, 38,3% of women, 33,5% of men, and 35,9% of respondents overall stated that religion was “very important” to them<sup>[10]</sup>. As can be seen, over the approximately fifteen years that elapsed since the first survey, the proportion of individuals who attach particular importance to religion increased by more than six percentage points. By contrast, the share of those who regarded religion as “rather important” declined substantially, falling to 33,3%. At the same time, the proportion of respondents who stated that religion was “not important at all” tripled, reaching 10,2%.

One of the most striking findings in this dataset is that younger respondents appear to be more religious than older age groups. Specifically, 40,5% of those under the age of 30, compared to 37,2% of those aged 30–49 and 29% of those aged 50 and above, reported that religion was “very important” in their lives.<sup>[11]</sup> At first glance, this finding appears counterintuitive, as everyday social understandings in Azerbaijan commonly associate greater religiosity with advancing age. While younger individuals are typically afforded *slightly* greater latitude, older people are

increasingly expected to conform to religious norms and to orient their lives toward what is locally framed as the “way of God.”

Identical results were obtained in a study conducted in the same year (2011) by the US-based Pew Research Center (hereafter Pew). According to Pew’s published report, religion plays a “very important” role in the lives of 36% of Azerbaijanis.<sup>[12]</sup> Moreover, another Pew report published in 2018 indicates that older respondents (36%) attach relatively less importance to religion than younger ones (39%).<sup>[13]</sup> It is worth noting that many media reports portraying Azerbaijan as an “irreligious country” rely precisely on Pew surveys, and that this “irreligious” label is derived specifically from the indicator measuring the “importance of religion.” However, a closer examination of the data reveals that, based on this particular indicator, Azerbaijan is not only far from being the “least religious” country in the world, but is not even the least religious among Muslim post-Soviet countries. For example, among Muslim post-Soviet states, only 18% of respondents in Kazakhstan and 30% in Uzbekistan reported that religion was very important to them. Similarly, the corresponding figure is the same as Azerbaijan’s in Bosnia and Herzegovina (36%), while in Albania it stands at just 15%.<sup>[14]</sup>

Returning to the WVS-6 data, in 2011 only 1,8% of respondents in Azerbaijan reported being active members of a religious community, while the proportion of non-active members declined to 1%. At the same time, the share of those with no affiliation whatsoever to any religious organization increased slightly, surpassing 97%. Interestingly, active members were evenly distributed across gender and age groups, whereas among non-active members women (1,5%) were represented at roughly twice the rate of men (0,8%).<sup>[15]</sup>

In this survey, 97,1% of respondents identified themselves as Muslim (an increase of six percentage points compared to the

previous survey), while only 1,1% (five percentage points lower than before) reported having no religious affiliation. Here, too, younger respondents (97,2%) appeared slightly more inclined than older ones (95,5%) to identify as Muslim. With regard to participation in religious ceremonies, the overall picture can be said to have remained largely unchanged. In this survey, 2,6% of respondents reported attending religious ceremonies “more than once a week,” 2.3,% “once a week,” and 38,4% “only on special occasions” (once again, women were found to participate in religious ceremonies less frequently than men). By contrast, the proportion of those stating that they “almost never” participate in religious ceremonies increased dramatically, reaching 42,5%. Significant differences were also recorded in the proportion of respondents who described themselves as religious compared to the previous survey. Only 26,7% of respondents—almost four times lower than the earlier figure—identified themselves as “religious.” The share of atheists declined even further, approaching zero (0,1%). Here as well, women (28,9%) were more likely than men (24,4%) to describe themselves as religious, and younger respondents (29,8%) were more likely to do so than older ones (19,8%).<sup>[16]</sup>

Unlike the earlier survey, this wave also asked respondents how frequently they practiced worship. The results show that only 13,5% of Azerbaijani respondents engaged in worship “several times a day.” The proportion of women performing daily worship (15,2%) was somewhat higher than that of men (11,8%), while the proportion of younger respondents (18,1%) was significantly ( $p < 0.001$ ) higher than that of older ones (11,6%). The data further indicate that those who “almost never” engage in worship constitute more than 40% of society, with men being overrepresented compared to women, and older respondents compared to younger ones.<sup>[17]</sup>

A similar question was posed to respondents in the Pew survey; however, the results obtained there appear controversial.

According to this survey, 21% of Azerbaijanis reported performing the daily prayers, while 49% stated that, although they do not perform all prayers, they nonetheless engage in worship several times a day. Thus, according to this survey, 70% of the population in Azerbaijan engages in daily religious practice. Unfortunately, I was unable to obtain access to the questionnaire administered to respondents; however, based on the aggregate results, it is reasonable to assume that certain serious methodological errors were made in the study. My assumption is that the concepts of pray/prayer were not accurately translated in the Azerbaijani-language questionnaires and were instead understood by respondents as just to pray or supplication to God. For instance, the same indicator stands at 43% for Turkey, which suggests that Turkish respondents understood the question as referring specifically to ritual prayer (*namaz*). Drawing on everyday empirical experience, I would argue that the claim that 70% of Azerbaijanis perform daily ritual prayers—and that Azerbaijan is therefore more observant in terms of daily religious practice than Turkey—is not convincing. Moreover, there are elements within the survey results themselves that lend credence to this skepticism. For example, only 1% of Azerbaijani respondents stated that they attend a mosque “at least once a week,” whereas this figure reaches 44% in Turkey. In addition, 64% of Azerbaijani respondents reported that they “never go to a mosque.” Similarly, the proportion of those who stated that they observe the Ramadan fast in Azerbaijan (43%) is almost half that reported for Turkey (84%).<sup>[18]</sup> Overall, these data indicate that in terms of daily religious practices, Turkish society is more religious than Azerbaijani society. In this regard, the data for Turkey appear internally consistent. By contrast, the Azerbaijani data exhibit inconsistencies: for example, 64% of respondents report that they never attend mosque, while at the same time 70% indicate that they pray daily. This discrepancy suggests potential methodological limitations in the survey, rather than reflecting a true contradiction in religious behavior.

According to the WVS-6 survey, in 2011 the overwhelming majority of Azerbaijanis—99,7%—reported believing in God. The proportion of those who believe in the existence of hell and heaven also increased dramatically, reaching 81%. The share of respondents stating that God occupies a “very important” place in their lives rose sharply as well, surpassing 90% (90,2%). Moreover, more than 70% of respondents stated that the religion to which they belong is the “only true religion”; in other words, 32,6% reported that they “completely agree” with this statement, while 38,5% said they “agree.”<sup>[19]</sup> According to the Pew survey, 98% of respondents in Azerbaijan stated that they believe in God and that Muhammad is a prophet. This figure is higher than in all other Muslim post-Soviet countries—with the exception of Tajikistan (99%)—where the lowest level is recorded in Kazakhstan (83%), and it is even slightly higher than in Turkey (97%).<sup>[20]</sup>

According to the WVS, the proportion of respondents who believe that children should be raised in a religious manner also increased somewhat, approaching 20%. The share of those unwilling to live next to adherents of other religions rose significantly as well: 38,2% of women and nearly 35% of respondents overall stated that they would not wish to share a neighborhood with representatives of other religions. Another noteworthy finding is that roughly one third of Azerbaijanis believe that, in the event of a conflict between religion and science, priority should be given to religion. Moreover, more than twice as many young respondents (23,1%) as older ones (11,1%) stated that they “completely agree” with this proposition.<sup>[21]</sup>

Thus, when examining the results of two quantitative surveys conducted approximately fifteen years apart, the overall picture appears, at first glance, somewhat contradictory. In other words, while certain indicators suggest that Azerbaijanis have become more religious over time, others point instead toward secularization. How, then, could these

contradictions be explained?

### **How should we interpret the data?**

In several instances above, we have seen that the results of quantitative data do not fully align with our everyday observations. Indeed, one might reasonably question the extent to which quantitative research can yield reliable results when dealing with social phenomena. In my view, statistical methods are indispensable for examining social realities such as those discussed in this article. At the same time, these methods are never sufficient on their own and must be complemented by qualitative research. For this reason, the reader should approach the following paragraph as a form of autoethnographic reflection.

In my assessment, the most significant contradiction evident in the data lies in the fact that, over the period between the two surveys, the proportion of respondents who consider religion to be “very important,” as well as those who identify themselves as Muslim, increased, while the share of those who do not identify with any religion declined to near zero—yet, at the same time, the proportion of those who describe themselves as “religious” decreased dramatically. I believe this phenomenon can be explained by a shift in the meaning attributed to the concept of religiosity itself. As I have argued in another article<sup>[22]</sup> published on this platform, until relatively recently, what prevailed in many parts of Azerbaijan was a form of religion that could be described as “folk religion,” while orthodox Islam only began to be gradually imported into the country after the collapse of the Soviet Union. More broadly, I am of the view that in the pre-modern period—particularly in peripheral and rural areas far from urban centers—the dominant forms of belief were almost always heterodox across nearly all geographical contexts. This phenomenon has been studied to some extent in Western societies, but in the Azerbaijani case, it still awaits systematic documentation. Nevertheless, many readers may

recall from their own experience that the beliefs of ordinary people often contained a significant degree of what is commonly labeled as superstition. In this sense, the attacks launched by movements seeking to “modernize” religion against folk religious practices can also be understood as part of a broader process of orthodoxization.

With regard to the connection between this process and the data under discussion, I would argue that the sharp decline in the proportion of individuals identifying themselves as religious can be explained precisely by this process of orthodoxization. In other words, as orthodox Islam displaces folk religion, the label “religious” becomes more demanding, or “costly,” and no longer encompasses all believers; instead, only those who are able to devote sufficient resources—time, effort, and discipline—to religious practice come to see themselves as belonging to this category. As a result, while society as a whole may become more religious, the proportion of people who self-identify as religious declines.

In my view, the available data allow us to conclude only that Azerbaijani society has, if anything, become somewhat more religious in the period following the first survey. In other words, contrary to the sensationalist narratives prevalent in the media, Azerbaijan is not a country of irreligion; rather, it is a society that is undergoing a gradual, if uneven, process of religization. The fact that, in the second WVS dataset discussed here, younger people appear—contrary to common expectations—to be more religious than older cohorts on several indicators further supports this argument. Whether this trend will persist in the future, however, is a question for another discussion.

Thus, it becomes clear that, contrary to the claims made in media reports that periodically circulate, Azerbaijanis are not irreligious, nor does Azerbaijan rank among the ten least religious countries. Such reports usually rely on the indicator measured under the heading “the importance of

religion in one's life," yet even by this criterion, there are Muslim post-Soviet countries that are less religious than Azerbaijan. Although the data place Azerbaijan among relatively secular Muslim countries, there is no empirical basis for claiming that religiosity in the country is in continuous decline. On the contrary, the data suggest that, since the first survey, Azerbaijanis have shown at least a partial and gradual tendency toward greater religiosity. On many indicators, the fact that younger people appear to be more inclined toward religion than older cohorts can be regarded as one of the main pieces of evidence supporting this claim. At the same time, some indicators point to an increase in the importance of religion, while others suggest a decline—a pattern that, in my view, can be explained by the growing differentiation of society (a topic to which we will return in the second part).

The data also support the conclusion that the global phenomenon of women being more religious than men is likewise applicable in Azerbaijan. The only indicator on which men surpass women is participation in religious rituals, a finding that can be readily explained by the fact that Islam prescribes certain forms of communal worship primarily for men. In the second part of this article, we will attempt to address how sociological theories explain why women tend to be more religious than men, and why younger cohorts appear more religious than older ones.

## Notes and References

[1] See:  
<https://www.trend.az/azerbaijan/politics/1424629.html>;  
[https://modern.az/news/293878/javascript\(\)](https://modern.az/news/293878/javascript()) ;  
<https://www.meydan.tv/az/article/azerbaycan-dindarliq-derecesi-en-az-olan-olkeler-sirasindadir/>

and etc.

[2] Inglehart, R., C. Haerpfer, A. Moreno, C. Welzel, K. Kizilova, J. Diez-Medrano, M. Lagos, P. Norris, E. Ponarin & B. Puranen et al. (eds.), (2014). World Values Survey: Round Three – Country-Pooled Datafile Version: [www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV3.jsp](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV3.jsp). Madrid: JD Systems Institute.

[3] Inglehart, R., C. Haerpfer, A. Moreno, C. Welzel, K. Kizilova, J. Diez-Medrano, M. Lagos, P. Norris, E. Ponarin & B. Puranen et al. (eds.), (2014). World Values Survey: Round Six – Country-Pooled Datafile Version: [www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp). Madrid: JD Systems Institute.

[4] World Values Survey Association, World Values Survey, accessed October 31, 2025, <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp> .

[5] The observed gender differences are not due to sampling error; in other words, they are statistically highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ).

[6] World Values Survey Association, WV3 Results: Azerbaijan (1995–1998), 2, accessed October 31, 2025, <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp> .

[7] Ibid., p. 5.

[8] Ibid., pp. 40–43.

[9] Ibid., pp. 4–5; 11.

[10] For this particular indicator, the gender difference is *not* statistically significant:  $p \approx 0.11$

[11] World Values Survey Association, WV6 Results, Azerbaijan, 1995–1998, 2–3, accessed October 31, 2025, <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp> .

[12] James Bell et al., The World's Muslims: Unity and

Diversity (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2012), 40, <http://pewrsr.ch/13sxjuP> . The study was conducted in 2011–2012 across 39 countries and regions in which nearly 70 percent of the world’s Muslim population resides. In Azerbaijan, the survey was carried out in December 2011 and included a randomly selected sample of 1,000 adults, 996 of whom identified as Muslim.

[13] Conrad Hackett et al., The Age Gap in Religion Around the World (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2018), 64, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/06/13/the-age-gap-in-religion-around-the-world/> .

[14] The World’s Muslims: Unity and Diversity, 40.

[15] WV6 Results, Azerbaijan, 9.

[16] Ibid., pp. 73–75.

[17] Ibid., pp. 74–75.

[18] The World’s Muslims: Unity and Diversity, 43–47, 54.

[19] WV6 Results, Azerbaijan, 76–78.

[20] The World’s Muslims: Unity and Diversity, 38.

[21] WV6\_Results, Azerbaijan, 6; 16; 77

[22] Araz Bagirov, “Muharram commemorations in the southern regions of Azerbaijan,” Baku Research Institute, 2018, <https://bakuresearchinstitute.org/en/azerbaycanin-cenub-rayonlarinda-meherrem-ezadarligi/> .