The Religious Landscape in Azerbaijan Part II: Why Are We Becoming More Religious?

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In the first part of this article, I sought to demonstrate how religious Azerbaijani society is and in which direction the country's religious landscape has been evolving. As we have seen, the data indicate that claims portraying the population as "irreligious" do not fully reflect reality and that the actual picture is to some extent distorted. Specifically, in the period between the first World Value Survey (WVS) wave that included Azerbaijan (WVS3) and the second one (WVS6), there has been a significant increase in the proportion of people who consider religion to be "very important." Moreover, the fact that younger generations appear to be more religious than older cohorts points to a strengthening of religion's position in Azerbaijan. The interpretation of the data also shows that, as in most parts of the world, women in Azerbaijan tend to be more religious than men. We further observed that the decline in the proportion of those who identify themselves as "religious" can be explained by a shift in the meaning attached to this concept—in other words, by the fact that the label "religious" has become more demanding or "costly." Put differently, a notion of religiosity that was previously limited to identifying as Muslim and believing without practice seems to have given way to an understanding that requires conformity with the lifestyle prescribed by Islam. This qualitative shift can be explained by the displacement of the previously dominant folk religion by a more orthodox form of religion that demands greater investments of time and effort from individuals.

Thus, when carefully analyzed, the quantitative data support everyday observations suggesting that the population has been

becoming more religious and that religion has become more visible in public life. But how can these developments be explained theoretically?

In social media and the daily press, the increasing religiosity of society is usually explained by the declining quality of education and the spread of ignorance, as well as by the active efforts of religious communities, often of foreign origin. While I do not consider such claims entirely unfounded, particularly given that religious communities' access to broad audiences through modern communication technologies cannot be without effect, I am convinced that more complex mechanisms underlie the observed changes. In other words, the growing religiosity of the population, and especially of younger people, cannot be explained simply by the "spread of ignorance" or by passive masses being "led astray" by preachers. As will become clear below, I believe that there has been an increase in the perceived need for religion within society, and I will attempt to explain the sources of this increase.

Accordingly, in order to answer the question posed above, this part of the article will examine the competing theories that dominate debates on religiosity and secularization in the social sciences. I will outline the core arguments on which each of these theories is based and seek to demonstrate which of them is better suited to explaining the current religious landscape observed in Azerbaijan.

Theoretical Alternatives

Before examining how sociological theories explain the strengthening (or weakening) of religion, it is necessary to clarify what we mean by secularization or secularity. In the sociology of religion, secularization generally refers to the process by which society as a whole, or particular social spheres, move outside the domain of religion or become detached from it. In other words, as a society becomes

secularized, spheres that were previously under religious control, or issues over which religion once held authority, come to operate or be interpreted on the basis of worldly values, without reference to religious ones. For example, in the arts, religious themes give way to secular ones; the surrounding world is explained not through the supernatural but as the result of natural forces; references to religious texts lose their significance within legal systems; moral frameworks that do not rely on religious texts or commandments begin to gain prominence; and so forth.[1]

The phenomenon of secularity that emerges as a result of this process is defined in various ways in the literature. In its broadest sense, secularity can be understood as the retreat of religion from public life into the boundaries of private life, a decline in the overall level of religiosity within society (that is, a decrease in the proportion of those who observe religious prescriptions), and the transformation of religiosity from an *ascribed* characteristic into *one option* among *many possible choices*.[2] Although these three aspects of secularity are interconnected, different societies may be quite religious with respect to one dimension while remaining secular with respect to another. In other words, a society's members may be highly religious, while its institutions remain profoundly secular.

With a few rare exceptions, the classical theorists of the social sciences interpreted secularization as an inevitable outcome of progress. Although the forces presumed to drive this process vary depending on the theoretical framework, the claim that all societies would inevitably undergo this transformation over time is a core component of all major "grand theories." In the sociology of religion, the particularly influential Weberian tradition, founded by Max Weber, argued that this process stemmed from modernization – that is, from the rationalization and differentiation (specialization) of society.[3] According to this perspective, the operating principles of institutions increasingly come to

be based on reason rather than dogma, and many domains that were previously under religious control pass out of its authority and into the hands of specialized institutions that rely on science rather than transcendental forces. As a result, religion is compelled to confine itself to a narrowly defined sphere of spiritual activities.[4]

Historical experience, however, especially from the final decades of the twentieth century onward, challenged this classical approach. In many parts of the world, religion has refused to remain confined to the boundaries of private life allocated to it and has returned to public life and politics[5]. This has compelled sociologists either to abandon the classical paradigm altogether or, at the very least, to revise and refine it substantially. Today, debates on religion and secularization are dominated by two competing theoretical approaches. These can broadly be categorized as demand-side theory and supply-side theory. Put simply, the first approach, which focuses on the demand side, argues that people's need for religion is not constant but varies under different conditions. The second approach, which emphasizes the supply side – namely, the activities of religious communities – maintains that the human demand for religion is constant, and that societal processes of religiosity or secularization depend primarily on the degree of activity and competitiveness of religious organizations.

Below, I will briefly consider both of these theoretical perspectives and attempt to demonstrate which of them offers a more convincing explanation of the religious landscape currently observed in Azerbaijan.

Supply-Side Theory

Supply-side theory, or religious market theory, was advanced by the American sociologists Rodney Stark and Roger Finke and developed in detail in their book Acts of Faith (2000).[6]

According to this theory, a religious market or religious

economy operates within a given society in a manner analogous to the exchange of other consumer goods. In this market, *religious products* are exchanged, and *firms*, understood here as religious organizations, compete with one another to attract existing or potential *clients*.[7]

As is evident, this approach is largely inspired by economic theory, particularly as developed by Adam Smith.[8] Before assessing the extent to which it can be applied to the Azerbaijani case, it is necessary to outline its core assumptions.

Stark and Finke argue that demand in the religious market is essentially constant. In other words, people always have a need for religion. Variations in the proportion of religious individuals within a given society therefore depend on the effectiveness with which firms, that is, religious organizations, operate.[9]

Another foundational claim of this theory is that regulation of the religious market by the state, or the monopolization of the market through the establishment of a state religion, has a negative effect on the exchange of religious goods. In unregulated markets, by contrast, *pluralism* emerges in the form of a greater *variety of goods*. Put differently, in an unregulated religious market, a larger number of organizations compete for new adherents, and this competitive environment leads to an improvement in the quality of religious goods.[10]

Of course, it is not possible to examine the theory in detail here. However, it can be stated briefly that the entire approach is built around two core assumptions: (1) humans always have a need for religion, and (2) liberalism leads people to actively join religious communities.

This theory emerged out of an attempt to explain what is known in the sociological literature as American exceptionalism. Classical secularization theory, namely the claim that modernization leads to secularization, struggles to explain

why the United States, one of the most highly developed and modernized societies, has consistently high levels of religious participation and full churches, unlike other developed Western countries. According to Stark and Finke, market theory provides a convincing explanation for this phenomenon. In other words, the United States is not an exception. The high proportion of religious individuals in the country can be explained by the openness of the religious market and by the ability of religious organizations to compete freely with one another without significant state interference. By contrast, the lower and declining levels of religiosity in many other developed Western countries, particularly in Europe, are attributed to the existence of established churches and to state restrictions placed on certain new religious actors, such as Jehovah's Witnesses.[11]

Assuming that we are now familiar with the core claims of the theory, we can proceed to examine how well it explains the situation in Azerbaijan. The first claim that must be tested concerns the degree of freedom of the religious market in Azerbaijan. In other words, if religious communities are losing adherents in European countries while Azerbaijani society is becoming more religious, even if only gradually, one would have to assume that religious communities in Azerbaijan operate more freely than their counterparts in Europe.

Although it is clear that claims supporting this assumption can scarcely be found outside of government-affiliated media in Azerbaijan, let us nevertheless turn to the data provided by international organizations and research institutes, at least for readers who may not be closely familiar with the realities on the ground.

The Pew Research Center, which we encountered in the first part of this article, has published annual reports since 2009 assessing restrictions on religion across nearly 200 countries worldwide. These reports are based on analyses of a wide range

of sources, including the United States Department of State's annual Reports on International Religious Freedom, as well as relevant publications by European institutions and comparable bodies within the United Nations system. Published fifteen times to date, these reports evaluate countries using two distinct indices related to religious restrictions.

The first index, the Government Restrictions Index (GRI), is calculated on the basis of up to twenty criteria, including a country's legal framework governing religion, the official or unofficial support of particular beliefs by the state, discrimination against specific religious groups, and the persecution of adherents of certain faiths. The second index, the Social Hostilities Index (SHI), is based on assessments of acts of hostility or violence motivated by religion and carried out by individuals or non-governmental actors within society. Each country included in the study is scored on both indices on a scale ranging from 0.0 to 10.0. For the GRI and SHI, respectively, scores of 0.0 to 2.3 and 0.0 to 1.4 are classified as *low*, 2.4 to 4.4 and 1.5 to 3.5 as *moderate*, 4.5 to 6.5 and 3.6 to 7.1 as *high*, and 6.6 to 10.0 and 7.2 to 10.0 as *very high*.[12]

As for Azerbaijan's position in these reports, the overall picture is largely as expected. The findings indicate that there is little serious social hostility on religious grounds in Azerbaijan, but that state restrictions on religion are substantial. More specifically, based on data from 2007, which underpinned the first report, Azerbaijan's GRI score was 5.0, placing it in the *high* category, while its SHI score was 2.9, classified as *moderate*. In subsequent years, the divergence between these two indicators has become even more pronounced. Azerbaijan has come to be categorized among countries with *very high* levels of state restrictions on religion, while levels of social hostility on religious grounds have declined further. According to data from 2022, Azerbaijan's GRI score stands at 7.5, while its SHI score has fallen to 0.8.[13]

It is worth noting that countries cited by Stark and Finke as examples of states with official religions that allegedly fail to provide sufficient religious freedom to their citizens, such as the United Kingdom (GRI: 2.7), Denmark (GRI: 3.3), Norway (GRI: 3.5), and Sweden (GRI: 3.0), exhibit a far more favorable situation with regard to freedom of conscience than Azerbaijan.[14] Interestingly, in Norway the corresponding indicator stood at 1.5 in 2007, prior to the formal secularization of the state in 2017, suggesting that, at least at first glance, the abolition of the official status of the Church of Norway coincided with a *deterioration* rather than an improvement in this measure.

Of course, an extensive comparison between Azerbaijan and the countries mentioned above in terms of freedom may appear misplaced to the reader. The purpose here, however, is to demonstrate that the authors' tendency to present official religious institutions rooted in specific historical trajectories and traditions as indicators of a lack of freedom of conscience is not particularly convincing. In other words, the data show that formally secular Azerbaijan is not freer than formally Anglican Britain, and that while secularization continues in Britain, which imposes fewer restrictions, Azerbaijani society has been undergoing a gradual process of religiousization.

Although restrictions in Azerbaijan are often explained by political and geopolitical considerations, and state involvement by taking a side[15] even in purely theological debates is justified in terms of political security concerns, the periodic persecution of religious communities[16] that pose no tangible political threat, together with the state's increasingly tight control over religious institutions, demonstrates that the growing religiosity of society cannot be explained through the logic of a *free market*.

Moreover, the theory advanced by Stark and Finke also fails to provide a convincing explanation for another empirical finding

reflected in the data, namely the fact that women are more religious than men. First and foremost, the male dominance of all major religions, and the fact that in Islam communal forms of worship are designed primarily for men, render even more puzzling the observation that men, who are ostensibly the primary targets of religious "marketing," are less religious than women. In other words, market theory requires external support to account for this phenomenon. Indeed, recognizing this weakness in the original framework, R. Stark attempted to address the gap in a separate article published in 2002[17], in which he sought to explain this difference through biological and psychological distinctions between men and women.

Ironically, an author who elsewhere rightly criticizes[18] others for seeking answers in psychology rather than treating religion as a social phenomenon turns in this article directly to human biology. In short, Stark explains the near-universal tendency for women to be more religious than men across societies and historical periods by arguing that men, due to higher levels of testosterone[19], are more inclined toward risk-taking. Here, "risk" refers to the potential consequences of accepting or rejecting belief in the afterlife. Put differently, because men are more prone to risk-taking, they are more willing to risk eternal punishment in order to live as they wish, whereas women are more likely to take this threat seriously and to make sacrifices in this world in order to avoid suffering in the afterlife.

Overall, the article relies on outdated and widely discredited theories, many of them implicitly racialized, that emphasize the effects of biology on social behavior, such as alleged links between physical constitution and aggressive risk-taking, including criminality.[20] It further attempts to draw a connection between men's greater propensity to turn away from religion and their higher likelihood of engaging in criminal behavior, attributing both phenomena to testosterone.[21]

In my view, this theoretical approach fails to explain convincingly and parsimoniously either the increasing religiosity of society in a context lacking religious pluralism or the fact that women are more religious than men. For this reason, we can now turn to the competing theory, which I believe offers more satisfactory answers to the questions at hand.

Demand-Side Theory

As noted above, the American exception, as well as the return of religion to the public sphere in many parts of the world after refusing to remain confined to the space allocated to it, led many sociologists to reconsider the classical secularization thesis. Some theorists, however, refrained from rejecting the older theory altogether and instead sought to revise and update it. The approach discussed below, which emphasizes the role of demand, can be considered part of this effort.

By demand-side theory, in contrast to the market theory discussed earlier, we mean theoretical approaches that focus not only on the activities of religious institutions but also on people's need for religion, as well as on how this need changes under different conditions. The theory advanced by Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, and developed in their book *Sacred and Secular* (2004), is a representative example of this approach.

In that book, the authors argue that we do not have sufficient grounds to claim that the founders of the social sciences were entirely mistaken about the fate of religion. Rather, they suggest that in order to understand contemporary reality, we must move beyond the boundaries of the United States and Western Europe and examine the broader global picture.[22]

When we look at this global picture, we see that religion tends to be particularly strong in poorer countries, especially among their more marginalized populations. The data

analyzed in the book suggest that individuals who, in the early stages of their lives, are exposed to risks that threaten themselves, their relatives, or their communities are more inclined toward religion. Put differently, people who grow up under conditions of *security and stability* are less likely to be religious.[23]

The authors describe this broad condition of safety and stability using the concept of *existential security*. This concept encompasses not only basic economic deprivation but also gender-, race-, and nationality-based discrimination, war-related threats, and other forms of inequality.[24]

This theoretical framework is also able to explain the American exception in a convincing way. Unlike other advanced Western countries, the United States lacks strong welfare state institutions and therefore offers its citizens lower levels of existential security. This, in turn, leads people, particularly those in less privileged social positions, to turn toward religion.[25]

How, then, can the strengthening of religion in Azerbaijan after the collapse of the Soviet Union be explained within this framework? Clearly, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the experience of war alone suffice to argue that society passed through a period of profound existential threat. In addition, particularly during the early years of independence, the country faced severe unemployment and significant income inequality, both of which generated substantial demand for religion within society. With the exception of the early independence period, it is evident that the current economic system has increased the diversity and accessibility of consumer goods. However, the issue here is not absolute or extreme poverty, but rather *relative deprivation*. It concerns growing inequality in access to goods and services, whereby certain commodities become simultaneously visible and unattainable. They are present in the immediate social environment, yet inaccessible to oneself.

Furthermore, the emergence of widespread unemployment in the regions following the collapse of the Soviet Union, along with displacement caused by war and joblessness, led to the disintegration of local communities. This process confronted individuals with yet another form of existential threat.

Taken together, these developments prompted people to turn toward religion in search of consolation, meaning, and new forms of community. It is important to emphasize that religion did not play a solely spiritual role in this context. In many cases, it also helped address certain material needs. For example, it is not uncommon for religious communities to assist their members in finding employment.

Incidentally, this theory is also supported by the fact that in Eastern European countries like Azerbaijan, which were members of the Socialist Bloc but managed to build a more successful economic system after the adoption of capitalist economic aspects (and even in Poland, whose struggle against the communist regime had obvious religious overtones), despite having a higher level of freedom of conscience[26], religion has gradually lost its influence[27] in recent decades.

In addition, this theoretical approach is able to explain the fact that women are more religious than men without resorting to auxiliary assumptions. The persistence of this phenomenon across all known societies and historical periods can be attributed to the universal presence of patriarchy. In other words, in addition to the forms of deprivation experienced jointly with men, women are also subject to gender-based discrimination, oppression, and exploitation. This helps explain why women are more likely to turn to religion.

Of course, I do not claim that the active efforts of religious communities have no impact on rising levels of religiosity. However, such activities alone are not sufficient to attract people to religion. Religious communities can succeed only where there is adequate demand within society.

On the other hand, I also do not claim that human beings have no intrinsic need for transcendence or belief in supernatural forces. Whether such a need exists is a separate and broader question. Even if we accept the existence of such a natural inclination, it can manifest itself in other forms of spirituality. Traditional religions, however, require substantial investments of time, energy, and sacrifice. In other words, they are costly. This suggests that, in general, people turn to religion primarily in the face of deprivation, that is, when they feel a need to compensate for the losses and insecurities they experience.

Conclusion

Data produced by international research institutes indicate that Azerbaijani society has been undergoing a gradual process of religiousization over the past decades. This trend is reflected in the increasing importance that Azerbaijanis attach to religion, as well as in the fact that, contrary to common expectations, younger generations appear to be more religious than older ones. The data also show that women in Azerbaijan are more religious than men.

Contemporary sociological literature offers two competing theoretical frameworks for explaining this phenomenon. According to market or supply-side theory, which explains increasing religiosity through changes on the supply side, a rising proportion of religious individuals in a given society should be attributed to favorable conditions for the operation of religious organizations, enabling them to successfully attract new adherents. In the Azerbaijani case, however, the existence of extensive state restrictions on religious institutions suggests that the observed increase in religiosity cannot be explained by the emergence of religious pluralism.

The competing demand-side theory explains increasing religiosity through changes in demand, arguing that people’s

need for religion is not constant and that individuals facing significant existential threats are more likely to turn toward religion. Within this framework, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the subsequent experience of war, the growth of economic inequalities, particularly rising levels of relative deprivation, and the erosion of community cohesion due to migration to cities in search of employment can all be identified as key factors underlying the observed rise in religiosity in Azerbaijan. Unlike its rival, this theory is also able to explain the fact that women are more religious than men without resorting to additional assumptions, by pointing to women's greater exposure to social, economic, and political inequalities.

First part:

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

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[1] Peter L. Berger, The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 125–26.

[2] Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 7–30.

[3] José Casanova, Public Religions in the Modern World (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 20.

[4] Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 7–30.

[5] José Casanova, Public Religions in the Modern World (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 51.

[6] Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[7] Ibid., 35-36.

[8] Ibid., 35, 45.

[9] Ibid., 193.

[10] Ibid., 198-199.

[11] Ibid., 221-223.

[12] Samirah Majumdar, ed., “Government Restrictions on Religion Stayed at Peak Levels Globally in 2022,” Pew Research Center, 2024, 3, 4–5, https://www.pewresearch.org.

[13] “Government Restrictions on Religion Stayed at Peak Levels Globally in 2022,” appendix C, 2.

[14] Ibid., 4-5.

[15] Kenan Rovshanoglu, “Why Was Ashura Observed over Two Days in Azerbaijan This Year?” Baku Research Institute, 2025, accessed October 25, 2025, https://bakuresearchinstitute.org/niye-bu-il-azerbaycanda-asura-iki-gun-kecirildi/ .

[16] “Report on International Religious Freedom: Azerbaijan,” U.S. Department of State, 2022, accessed October 27, 2025, https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/azerbaijan/ .

[17] Rodney Stark, “Physiology and Faith: Addressing the ‘Universal’ Gender Difference in Religious Commitment,” Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 41, no. 3 (2002): 495–507.

[18] Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, Acts of Faith, 9–13.

[19] Rodney Stark, “Physiology and Faith: Addressing the ‘Universal’ Gender Difference in Religious Commitment,” 502.

[20] Ibid., 503.

[21] Ibid., 504-505.

[22] Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide, 4–5.

[23] Ibid., 18.

[24] Ibid., 13-14.

[25] Ibid., 32.

[26] For example, based on 2022 data, the GRI index stands at 2.2 for Poland and 2.7 for the Czech Republic. See: “Government Restrictions on Religion Stayed at Peak Levels Globally in 2022,” appendix C, 4–5.

[27] See: Irena Borowik et al., “Central and Eastern Europe,” in The Oxford Handbook of Atheism, ed. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 622–637.