

The background of the cover is a photograph of a subway tunnel. Two escalators lead up and down the tunnel, flanked by rows of glowing spherical lights. The tunnel's arched ceiling and the perspective of the escalators create a strong sense of depth and symmetry.

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Zentrum für Osteuropa-
und internationale Studien
*Centre for East European
and International Studies*

No. 3/2020 · July 2020

ZOIS REPORT

**FAITH AND STATE:
GOVERNING RELIGIOUS
PLURALITY IN POST-SOVIET
AZERBAIJAN**

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Summary

The resurgence of religion is an important feature of post-Soviet transformation. In Azerbaijan, Islam is generally considered the mainstream faith. Indeed, over the last thirty years, the number of mosques in the country has increased from twenty-four to over 2,000. However, Azerbaijan is also home to a number of other confessional groups, including Christian and Jewish minorities.

Over the last decade, the Azerbaijani government has replaced moderate religious policies that welcomed Islam with a more restrictive approach. New restrictions emphasise centralised control of religious issues in public spaces and an ideology of top-down multiculturalism. By claiming to counteract recent religious activism from below, the Azerbaijani state is attempting to create a national standard for state-sponsored spirituality, while favouring the separation religion from the state.

Currently, Azerbaijan's elites employ three strategies for interacting with faith-based organisations. The first is control over faith and its public presence, in particular for new Muslim communities and oppositional Shia Islam. The second strategy consists of selected restrictions on nontraditional faiths with transnational ties. The third strategy is strategic co-optation with confessions that can be useful for elevating Azerbaijan's image on the world stage.

These approaches mutually reinforce the state's instrumentalisation of a long tradition of religious plurality and give the state a monopoly over defining and shaping religious expressions in Azerbaijan. In the context of growing religious plurality, the Azerbaijani state will face political and social challenges as it seeks to reconcile a policy of multiculturalism with a redefinition of Islam as part of the country's national heritage.

Introduction¹

The revival of religion and desecularisation processes in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus have provoked new discussions about religious growth in public spaces and the nature of state-religion relations. Located at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, Azerbaijan is a highly dynamic and a rich laboratory of social and cultural change. Numerous studies have drawn attention to a religious resurgence in the country that manifests itself predominantly in a growing number of devoted Muslims. However, while Azerbaijan is usually associated with Islam, it is also a home to a number of other religious groups. Religious plurality has found its expression in post-socialist Azerbaijan not only in the visible return of mainstream faiths that underwent significant changes during the Soviet period but also in the arrival of new religious forces, such as purist global Muslim communities, transnational religions like Protestant and Evangelical Churches, Krishnism, and the Baha'i faith.

The growing variety of religious groups creates challenges for the Azerbaijani state authorities and for existing patterns of belonging. These have to deal with both discontinuity, as the lines of old traditions and newcomers do not necessarily overlap, and continuity, as there is still some commonality of ethnic and religious attributes.

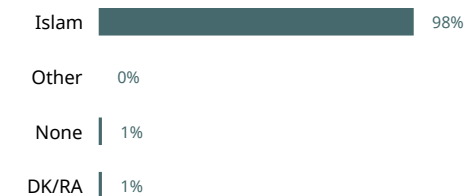
In the Soviet censuses, the category of faith was replaced by ethnicity (ethnic group or nationality), which still shapes a strong association between faith and ethnic background in today's Azerbaijan. According to the 2013 Caucasus Barometer, a major survey of religious affiliation in post-Soviet Azerbaijan developed by official institutions and independent international

1 The research contribution by Yulia Aliyeva is gratefully acknowledged.

FIGURE 1

Respondents' religion*

Which religion or denomination, if any, do you consider yourself belong to?



n = 1,988

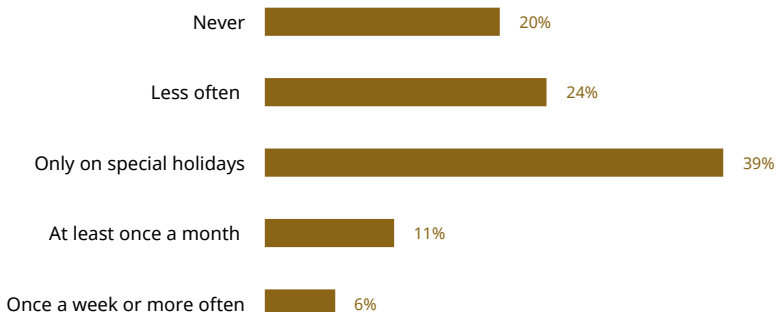
* The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance in data visualisation (Figures 1 – 5) provided by Sina Gieseemann.

Source: authors' own graph; data sources: Caucasus Barometer Survey, 2013

FIGURE 2

Frequency of attendance of religious services

Apart from special occasions such as weddings and funerals, about how often do you attend religious services nowadays?



n = 1,988

Source: authors' own graph; data sources: Caucasus Barometer Survey, 2013

organisations, 98 per cent of adults in Azerbaijan identified themselves as Muslims. ► FIGURE 1 At the same time, the survey showed a relatively low level of religiosity. ► FIGURE 2 Only 6 per cent of respondents attended a religious service once a week, and only 10 per cent fasted when required by religious tradition.

By highlighting the Azerbaijani context, this report draws attention to one of the most secularised states in the Islamic world. Due to early and sustainable secularisation processes that started at the end of the nineteenth century, Azerbaijan presents an interesting case of a secular response to the post-Soviet revival of religion. The modern Azerbaijani state promotes the separation of religion from the state and a degree of ethnic and religious plurality, partly recognising a growing number of other Muslim groups, Christians and Jews.

A combination of quantitative and qualitative research is needed for a deeper understanding of the complexity and ambiguity of relations between state and faith in Azerbaijan. This report makes some initial steps in this direction. What can be said at this stage is that the state seems interested in downplaying the religious variable in personal and collective identities, preferring to classify the population according to ethnicity (ethnic group or nationality). However, in contrast to the statistical data, which suggest a low level of religiosity, a new diversity of religious communities and the measures adopted by the Azerbaijani state to regulate matters of faith point to specific trajectories of desecularisation.

This report considers three main questions: Firstly, to what extent has the Azerbaijani state's stance on religion changed over the last two decades? Secondly, what are the main factors shaping this transformation? And thirdly, how is the Azerbaijani state responding to growing religious plurality? Based on preliminary research results, this report identifies the ways in

which the authorities attempt to regulate cultural diversity on the national level. In doing so, the report aims to contribute to cutting-edge research in the field of faith and state power in post-Soviet societies.

The report draws on an analysis of qualitative interviews with representatives of state organisations, experts, scholars, and religious leaders, conducted by the author and her team during fieldworks in Baku in May 2018 and February–April 2019. First-hand data collection includes an analysis of changing state laws, available state statistical sources, and selected media sources in the Azeri, English, and Russian languages.

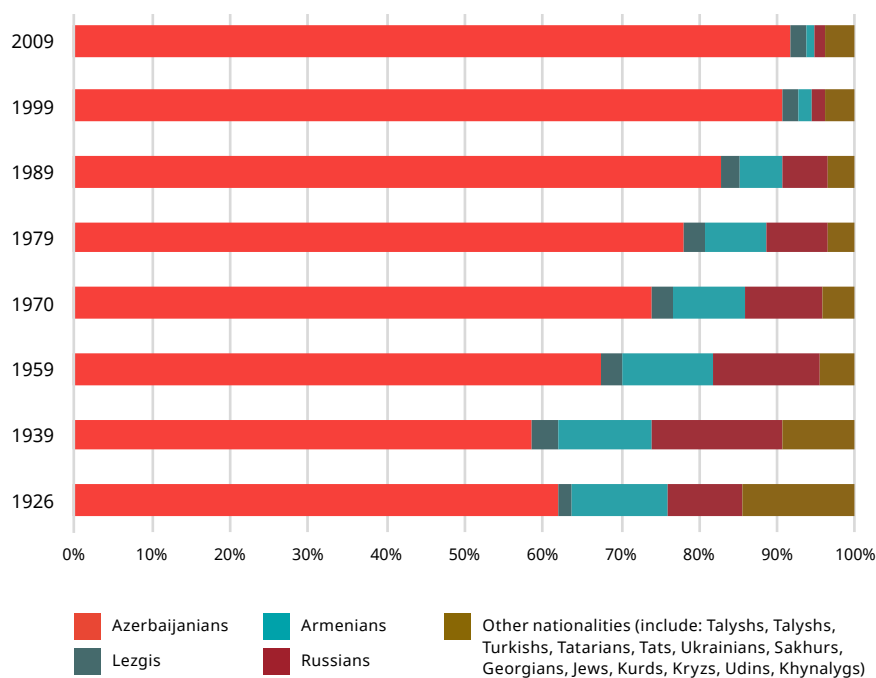
Growing religious plurality: a new configuration

Statistically, it is difficult to identify people’s religious affiliation in Azerbaijan, because this is not recorded by the country’s census. The Azerbaijani population tends to answer the census question about which confession they belong to in terms of the ethnicity they inherited from their parents. ► **FIGURE 3** Thus, information about religious affiliation is strongly linked to nationality.

FIGURE 3

Azerbaijan’s population by ethnic groups (%)

Each interviewed person determined own nationality and native language himself (or herself). Information about nationality and native language of children are obtained from the parents.



Source: authors' own graph; data source: The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan 2009, data for 2019 is not yet available

The task of accurately measuring the level of religiosity in post-Soviet Muslim society also has limitations, as surveys tend to use standard measures developed for Western Christian societies. This means that the different cultural contexts and the privatisation of religion in the former Soviet Union are not taken into account.²

For this reason, Nicat Mamadli, a former member of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, emphasised that if religious belonging is indicated in surveys and statistical data, these are very ‘conditional data’.³ For instance, if a person defines himself or herself as an ethnic Azeri, his or her confession is automatically considered to be Islam; this is how 98 per cent of the Azerbaijani population is counted as Muslim. According to Mamadli, this discrepancy is explained by the existence of different understandings of Islamic religiosity. By measuring the level of religiosity, local scholars in Azerbaijan differentiate between the notions of private and public religiosity.⁴

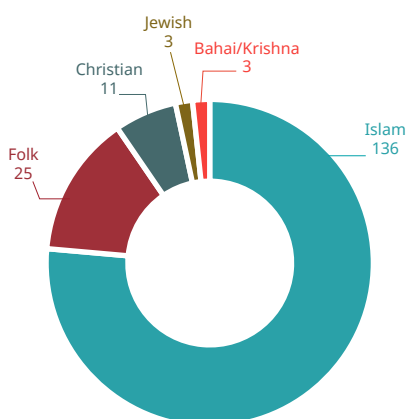
There is a relatively high diversity of religious groups and sacred sites in Azerbaijan. This is reflected in the country’s growing number and variety of registered religious organisations. According to the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, as of 2017, 136 mosques, eleven churches, three synagogues, two Baha’i community centres, and one Krishna community centre had been registered in the capital city, Baku, which has a population of 2.2 million. ► FIGURE 4 Nationally, there are approximately 2,250 mosques, thirty churches, seven synagogues, and three Baha’i centres. In addition, there are at least 748 sacred folk Islamic and popular pilgrimage sites associated with healing and the veneration of saints. The local population visits these sites on a regular basis.⁵

Religious plurality in contemporary Azerbaijan has historical and more recent origins. Historically, located at the border between Europe and Asia and connected by transregional trade routes, Transcaucasia has always been a crossroads of different linguistic and ethnic groups living side by side and making up a unique ethnic and cultural mosaic.⁶

A significant development that contributed to a new level of religious pluralisation in Azerbaijan in the mid-nineteenth century was political and socioeconomic. It was driven by the experience of incorporation into the Russian Empire, which brought new modernisation processes and the immigration of ethnic and religious groups into Azerbaijan, predominantly from the European part of the empire, Western Europe, and, later, other

FIGURE 4
Registered religious organisations in Baku

178 total number of registered religious organisations in Baku



Source: authors’ own graph; data source: The State Committee for the Work with Religious Organisations 2017

- 2 The Caucasus Barometer surveys offer a few standard measures of religion, such as officially registered religious affiliation, frequency of attendance at religious services, frequency of prayer, importance of religiosity, and belief in God.
- 3 Interview with Nicat Mamadli, a former member of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations conducted by the author in Baku, May 2018.
- 4 Private religiosity as prescribed by Islam is based on the following criteria: prayer five times a day, fasting during the month of Ramadan, and refraining from forbidden food and drink, such as pork and alcohol. It does not take into account whether a person visits a mosque, engages in collective religious rites, or performs individual worship.
- 5 Tsypylma Darieva et al., *Sacred Places, Emerging Spaces: Religious Pluralism in the Post-Soviet Caucasus* (New York: Berghahn, 2018).
- 6 Tsypylma Darieva and Florian Mühlfried, ‘Kontaktraum Kaukasus: Sprachen, Religionen, Völker und Kulturen’, *Osteuropa*, no. 65, 7 – 10 (2015): pp. 45 – 70; Uwe Halbach, ‘Religion und Nation, Kirche und Staat im Südkaukasus’, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (Berlin, October 2016).

parts of the Soviet Union. Ethnic and religious diversity in Azerbaijan was reinforced through strategic resettlement of Russian Orthodox minority groups to the periphery of the Russian Empire. At the end of the nineteenth century, economic migration of different groups from the European part of Russia took off, continuing with the migration of experts and workers during Soviet industrialisation.

All of these movements contributed to growing ethnic and religious plurality, in particular when it came to Christianity and Judaism. Until recently, there was much less interest in non-Muslim religious communities in Azerbaijan. This can to some extent be justified by the statistically insignificant number of non-Muslim religious groups, such as Orthodox Christians, Jews, followers of Krishnaism, and members of the Baha'i faith. To a certain extent, this development is continued in the religious diversity of contemporary Azerbaijan. However, according to our observations, the current diversity is not a return to pre-Soviet religious constellations with rigid boundaries between Shia Muslim, Orthodox Christian, and Jewish religious communities. Rather, it is a new configuration shaped by external forces, globalisation, and the sociopolitical situation, leading to a process of internal pluralisation within one confession.

Islam

Islam is not homogeneous in Azerbaijan. In contrast to neighbouring Armenia and Georgia, which treat their mainstream confessions—the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Georgian Orthodox Church, respectively—as national religions protected by the constitution, Azerbaijan does not explicitly privilege Islam. Even Shia Islam, which was historically the *de facto* state religion and numerically the dominant faith in the country, has no special status in the modern constitution. According to rough estimates provided by local experts, Shias constitute 60–65 per cent of the Muslim population, and Sunnis 35–40 per cent. The number of Sunni Muslims in Azerbaijan is growing.⁷ This is not necessarily due to a strengthening of traditional local Shia Islam as a clerical institution, but rather to the internal pluralisation of Islam.

Turkey and Iran are important factors in shaping internal Muslim diversity.

Two external actors, Turkey and Iran, are important factors in shaping internal Muslim diversity in Azerbaijan and as a result, Muslims in Azerbaijan fall into one of three main groups. The first group, Shia Muslims, lives in different parts of the country, with some concentrated areas in Absheron, Ganja, Nakhchivan, and Lankaran. They follow not only local Azerbaijani but also transnational Iranian Shia spiritual leaders, which makes the state authorities suspicious of their loyalty. As a consequence, an ambivalent and hostile attitude towards Iran and Iranian Shiism is evident in Azerbaijan.

The second group, Sunni Muslims, has historically lived compactly along Azerbaijan's border with Russia in the Sheki-Zaqatala and Quba-Khachmaz regions. Today, Sunni Muslims are mixed with new groups influenced by Turkish religious schools like the Nurcu and Süleymanci movements. The third

7 Bayram Balci and Altay Goyushov, 'Azerbaijan', in *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe: Volume 4*, edited by Jørgen Nielsen, Samim Akgönül, Ahmet Alibašić, and Egdunas Raciūnas (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp. 41–56.

group can be identified as Salafis—new Muslim purists often influenced by the neighbouring Russian North Caucasus and Gulf countries.

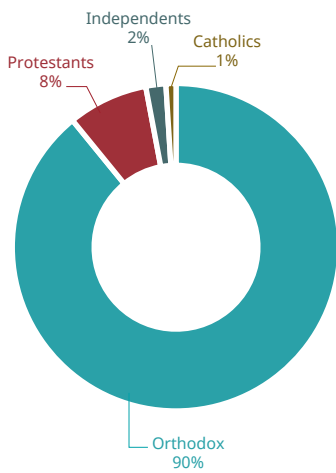
Finally, one should not underestimate the role of sacred folk Shia sites and popular beliefs that make up important everyday Islamic practices in Azerbaijan. Local folk shrines have been subjected to growing criticism from institutionalised clergy and Muslim purists as well as those who label local shrines and other peripheral worship sites as pagan and deviant from scriptural Islam.

Christianity

Within Christianity, the Russian Orthodox Church makes up the majority of Christians in Azerbaijan, followed by a variety of Protestant Churches, the Catholic Church, and new Charismatic and Evangelical communities.⁸

► FIGURES 5 + 6

FIGURE 5
Christian Traditions in Azerbaijan 2020



Source: authors' own graph;
data source: World Christian Database 2020

FIGURE 6
Main Christian Communities in pre-Soviet and post-Soviet Azerbaijan
Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches are included

Pre-Soviet	Post-Soviet
Russian Orthodox	Russian Orthodox
Georgian Orthodox	Georgian Orthodox
Lutheran	Lutheran
Catholic	Catholic
Molokan Faith	Molokan Faith
Armenian Apostolic	Agape Baptists
Doukhorbor	Alban-Udi
Eastern Baptists	Alov Flame
Old-Rite Staroobryadtsy	Baku International Fellowship
Pentecostal	Baku Russian Baptist
Presbyterian	Grater Grace
Seventh-Day Adventists	Jehovah's Witnesses
	Lord's Temple
	Nehemiah
	New Apostolic
	New Life
	Star of the East
	Vineyard Azerbaijan
	Word of Life

Source: ZOIS and Anar Alizade, *Christianity in Azerbaijan: from Past to Present*, Baku 2019.

8 For approximate data on changing confessional demographics in Azerbaijan, see Bruno De Cordier, Allan Kaval, and Inga Popovaite, 'Religious Minorities', *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, no. 81 (2016).

The Russian Orthodox Church enjoys the most privileged position in the country, as manifested in three prominent buildings in Baku and good relations with the state authorities. However, the number of Russian Orthodox Christians in Azerbaijan declined after the emigration of Russian-speaking skilled migrants and the flight of Armenian-speaking groups due to the 1991–1993 Karabakh War.

The beginning of the 1990s signalled the arrival of global Christianity to Azerbaijan as numerous missionaries spread around the country. After the Karabakh War and an influx of refugees, the government of Azerbaijan welcomed assistance from international organisations, among them a variety of Christian humanitarian groups.

Over the last decade, the ancient Albanian Udin Church has been restored and classified by the Azerbaijani authorities as one of the original sites of Christianity in the country. Strategic support for this church represents a move to fill the space left by the exodus of Armenian Christians after the Karabakh War. Since then, numbers of Christians have recovered with the arrival of new religious organisations connected to global religious movements—but not to the existing Russian Orthodox Church.

At the same time, the numbers of Protestant Christian communities and Evangelical networks have grown, as have their wider recognition and visibility, at least in Baku. The Catholic Church enjoys a degree of independence as it not subordinated to the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations. A new Catholic Church building was inaugurated in Baku in 2002, when Pope John Paul II made an official visit to Azerbaijan to meet president Ilham Aliyev.

Judaism

Along with the Orthodox Church, Judaism is also a privileged actor in Azerbaijan's religious landscape, making up the second traditional non-Muslim component in the country's religious plurality. Judaism in Azerbaijan has a unique and diverse composition based on migratory flows and local Jewish traditions. For instance, Baku is home to three Jewish communities and two synagogues. Another four synagogues are located in the Quba and Oghuz regions.

The Jewish minority in Azerbaijan is experiencing a resurgence from being a marginalised group to operating as a revived community and a state-sponsored institution. This process is manifested in two newly constructed synagogues in central Baku. One is shared by European Ashkenazi Jews and the community of Georgian Jews, who migrated to Azerbaijan at the end of the nineteenth century. The other has been built for so-called Mountain Jews—local Jews of the Sephardic tradition.

Despite high emigration of European Jews at the beginning of the 1990s, there is a relatively stable Jewish component shaping Azerbaijan's religious diversity. The establishment of strong transnational economic ties with Israel, Russia, and the United States has elevated the status of Jewish communities in Azerbaijani politics.

Judaism in Azerbaijan has a unique and diverse composition.

The Azerbaijani authorities use the terms ‘traditional’ and ‘nontraditional’ in a political way.

Traditional versus nontraditional faith

One of the main post-Soviet changes to relations between faith and state has been the securitisation of religious issues, in particular regarding Islam.⁹ State power is very much engaged in defining the boundaries of the religious domain, which is seen as a matter of surveillance and control. This approach has led to discrepancies in divisions of faith-based organisations into traditional and nontraditional religious communities.

The term ‘traditional religion’ is often used among scholars to refer to folk religion or indigenous, pagan, or shamanistic beliefs, which are considered pre-Islamic. However, in official Azerbaijani discourse, this term can be used to identify institutionalised religious denominations, such as the Russian Orthodox Church or Judaism. As for nontraditional religion, although this is not a legal term in Azerbaijan, it is widely used in the public discourse to describe both Muslim and non-Muslim denominations. Often, religious groups are referred to not as communities or movements but as sects or schools.

The Azerbaijani authorities use the terms ‘traditional’ and ‘nontraditional’ in a political way that allows them to regard distinctive religious communities as potential challenges and intervene in their practices by applying bureaucratic terminology such as ‘licensed’ and ‘unlicensed’ communities. Among the communities considered by the state authorities to be nontraditional are a number of Evangelical and Charismatic Protestant Churches, including Seventh-day Adventists and the Baptist Union, Krishnaism, new Muslim communities established after 1991, such as Salafis and the Nurcu movement, and other minorities—even long-lived historical traditions such as the Baha’i faith.¹⁰

Furthermore, representatives of traditional denominations often accuse new religious traditions, which have sprouted from mainstream religious doctrines of being alien and lacking historical roots. This creates a challenge for the classification of some small historical religious traditions, such as Doukhobors and Molokans, who have a relatively long historical tradition in Azerbaijan after breaking away from Orthodox Christianity in the eighteenth century.

The dichotomy of traditional versus nontraditional religion is the central component that shapes the hierarchical structure of Azerbaijan’s religious landscape and the state’s strategies for dealing with newcomers. In this context, religious communities and sacred sites have different relations with the state authorities in terms of their legitimacy, morality, and finances, including their visible incorporation into everyday life. The term ‘nontraditional religion’ circulates when the state authorities perceive a need to label as alien or foreign a religious group that promotes its interests and poses a threat to national security and identity.

9 Galib Bashirov, ‘Islamic discourses in Azerbaijan: the securitization of “non-traditional religious movements”’, *Central Asian Survey* 37, no. 1 (2018): pp. 31 – 49.

10 Interview with Agil Shirinov, vice rector of the Azerbaijan Institute for Theology, conducted by Aysham Balaeva, the authors’ field assistant, in Baku, February 2019.

The transformation of religious policy: from freedom to restrictions

Over the last thirty years, there has been a significant transformation of religious policy and a rise in state intervention to regulate religious issues in Azerbaijan. This process has been affected by different political and social factors that drive the state to impose stricter responses to perceived external threats and religious oppositional activism, on the one hand, while attempting to improve Azerbaijan's image on the international stage, on the other.

Azerbaijan witnessed a shift from welcoming policy to restrictive measures of state control.

Within this transformation, Azerbaijan has witnessed a shift of state-faith relations from an initial liberal, welcoming policy to restrictive measures of state control over religious practices in public spaces. Two periods of Azerbaijani state religious policies can be discerned: the 1990s, which were a period of relative freedom in religious activities; and the 2000s and 2010s, which saw the introduction of gradual restrictions and a centralised policy of control under the banner of top-down multiculturalism.

Freedom of religious activities

One of Azerbaijan's first legal acts after the collapse of the Soviet Union was to adopt a new law in August 1992 on the freedom of religious beliefs. Article 48 of Azerbaijan's post-Soviet constitution ensured religious freedom: all citizens gained the right to choose any faith and full freedom to express their views on religion, including proselytising. According to the 1992 law, this religious freedom could be restricted only within certain legal frameworks. This law, under which all religious practices were equal, reflected one of the most liberal policies on religious organisations in the post-Soviet space.

In the 1990s, the law was expanded to allow religious practices and celebrations in public spaces as well as attendance at religious services in mosques and churches. After his inauguration in 1993, the president of post-Soviet Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev, travelled to the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia for the umrah pilgrimage. This act was broadcast widely on local television as a new symbol of Azerbaijan's national identity.

The early 1990s also saw the arrival of novel Muslim ideas from Azerbaijan's strategic partners, such as Turkey, as well as the formation of new independent Muslim communities that followed doctrines from Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. A number of young people received their religious education in these countries and returned home as independent imams, or spiritual leaders, and started to preach new moral ideals and values.

Gradual restrictions

Soon after a short period of religious revival after Azerbaijan's independence in 1991, the country's government started to face challenges of integrating the new and diverse spiritual practices of Islamic communities into legal structures and national narratives. As a response, the country's

legal arrangements have been amended more than fifteen times, mainly in increasingly restrictive ways. New regulations aimed to limit religious freedom to prevent Muslim activism emerging from below throughout the country.¹¹ Limitations were imposed in particular on religious organisations with transnational ties, such as new Shia and Salafi Muslim communities and Christian Protestant Churches.

By 2008, the Azerbaijani authorities had moved to cancel a number of Islamic television programmes and Koranic education courses. In 2010, the government introduced a ban on wearing the hijab in public institutions and schools. Political parties were no longer allowed to engage in religious activities. Although Azerbaijan's constitution allows alternatives to military service 'in some cases' if this conflicts with personal beliefs, no legislation exists to provide such alternatives. Students may take courses in religion at higher-education institutions, but only citizens who have been educated in the country or whose religious education abroad has been approved by the government may hold religious leadership positions or conduct religious ceremonies. A new law prohibited proselytising by foreigners, and Azerbaijanis found to be advocating religious extremism may lose their citizenship.¹²

Later, the government created a list of religious literature whose import, production, sale, or distribution was prohibited without the authorisation of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations. The state placed greater control on the sale of Shia Islamic literature in bookshops and during official prayers in Baku's mosques. Literature with religious connotations was criminalised, banning the import into Azerbaijan of religious literature such as the Koran in Russian or Turkish and Christian literature from abroad. Officially recognised religious literature, audio, video, and objects may now be sold only in designated Muslim shops, usually near mosques. International organisations have issued publications and resolutions condemning Azerbaijan's authoritarian governance and violations of human rights.

Thus, Azerbaijan has become actively engaged in strengthening its secular regime by emphasising article 19 of the constitution, which affirms the separation of religion from the state. At the same time, the state is active in producing an inclusive policy of centralisation, in which formal institutions define the status and activities of faith-based organisations. Recent laws on religious freedom in Azerbaijan still emphasise freedom of worship, but with the explicit secular principle of the state management of religious plurality.

Azerbaijan has become actively engaged in strengthening its secular regime.

11 About 900 Azerbaijani citizens joined radical groups to fight in Syria and Iraq. See Nicat Mammadli, 'Islam and Youth in Azerbaijan', Baku Research Institute (Baku, 2019), <https://bakuresearchinstitute.org/islam-and-youth-in-azerbaijan/>.

12 The Azerbaijani political establishment perceives Iran as a threat to the ruling elite. According to Ansgar Jödicke, nobody knows exactly to what extent Shia groups would support an Iranian-style political system in Azerbaijan. See Ansgar Jödicke, 'Shia groups and Iranian religious influence in Azerbaijan: the impact of trans-boundary religious ties on national religious policy', *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15387216.2017.1413579>

Top-down politics of tolerance and multiculturalism

The separation of state and religion in Azerbaijan finds its expression in the 2010 introduction of a new policy of tolerance and multiculturalism. This is intended as a top-down instrument for promoting national unity on the basis of recognising ethnic and cultural diversity. Created in 2014, the post of state counsellor for multiculturalism and interethnic and religious affairs attempts to promote a new image of Azerbaijan in the world as a centre of multiculturalism with a long and unique cultural history of cohabitation in the Caucasus. According to Elshad Iskanderov, who chaired the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations from 2012 to 2014 and was presumably one of the architects of the multiculturalism policy, ‘tolerance is an integral part of the national identity of the Azerbaijani people’.¹³

The government started exporting an image of multiculturalism.

In light of this, the government started exporting an image of multiculturalism, turning it into an asset to improve the country’s image. According to the syllabus of Baku Slavic University, ‘the Republic of Azerbaijan exports not only oil and natural gas to the world but also tolerance’.¹⁴

A key policy institution in the state-sponsored regulation of religious and ethnic plurality is the Department of Interethnic Relations, Multiculturalism, and Religious Affairs, which was inaugurated in 2018 and reports to the president. This institution works with the Baku International Multiculturalism Centre, established in 2014. A member of the centre explained that multiculturalism in Azerbaijan should be understood as a product like ‘a candy bowl where different cultures come together, and all have their own smells and colours’.¹⁵

The department and the centre are engaged in top-down educational programmes that seek to brand the nation as a tolerant society with interfaith communication. In cooperation with the Ministry of Education, the centre develops university courses on multiculturalism and holds international summer schools twice a year. The inclusive policy focuses on the preparation of a local curriculum and textbooks in the Azeri, Russian, and Talysh languages. The centre also develops English-language textbooks for an international audience and, in 2020, started publishing in the *International Journal of Multiculturalism*.¹⁶

Within this centralist policy, the administration of religious affairs includes the establishment of a variety of public interfaith ceremonies, such as Bible Day. In 2019, the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations (SCWRA) organised a joint Easter celebration with the participation of all registered Christian communities, except the Russian Orthodox Church, which tends to repudiate any cooperation with what it sees as sectarians.

13 ‘Azərbaycan müxtəlif dini konfessiyaların tolerantlıq şəraitində yaşadığı məkandır’, *Madaniyyət*, 8 March 2013, <http://medeniyyet.az/page/news/18329/Azərbaycan-muxtelif-dini-konfessiyaların-tolerantlıq-seraitinde-yasadığı-mekandır.html>.

14 ‘Azerbaijani Multiculturalism’, the syllabus of Baku Slavic University, was developed by Kamal Abdullayev and Etibar Najafov and approved by the Azerbaijani Ministry of Education in 2015.

15 Interview with a member of the Baku International Multiculturalism Centre in PLACE in Baku, May 2018.

16 *International Journal of Multiculturalism*, <http://bimc-ijm.com/>.

The state institutions governing religion

Two main state-sponsored organisations govern and control religious affairs related to Islam and religious minorities in Azerbaijan. They are separate institutions that fulfil different tasks, but they cooperate closely by sharing data and the organisation of their work. The first body, the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations (SCWRA), is a secular, post-Soviet government agency responsible for regulating and supervising the activities of religious organisations in Azerbaijan. The government has required religious groups to re-register several times on the basis of new laws or amendments, most recently in 2014. The committee can appeal to the courts to suspend a religious group's activities.

The second institution is the Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB), which was established in 1872 by the Russian tsarist administration, relaunched in 1943, and known until the mid-1990s as the Spiritual Board of Transcaucasian Muslims. Whereas the state committee reviews and approves all Muslim and non-Muslim organisations, the CMB approves the registration of Muslim communities, appoints mosque-based imams who receive a monthly income, and controls Islamic religious activities, including the hajj pilgrimage, religious education, and literature for import, sale, and distribution.

The CMB is considered the highest spiritual authority for Muslims in Azerbaijan, including Muslim minorities in neighbouring Georgia and the North Caucasus. The board oversees the activities of Islamic communities without explicitly dividing Muslims into Shia or Sunni traditions. The leader of the CMB, Sheikh ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazadeh, was appointed in the 1980s as the grand mufti for both Shia and Sunni clerical issues and established a religious monopoly in Azerbaijan. However, his authority has been challenged by new pious Muslim groups in Baku and the Absheron Peninsula, which have accused the CMB of being a Soviet institution and not trustworthy enough to rule on sharia law and other religious matters.¹⁷

Since the 2010s, the Azerbaijani state authorities have supported the CMB as their main instrument in promoting the idea of 'proper' Islam by merging Sunni and Shia traditions within the country's national heritage. In this sense, Islam is used as part of a strategic state-building process under strict state control. In 2018, a presidential decree established the Azerbaijani Institute for Theology as a new higher-education institution to create the state's own educational channel for local Muslim clergy.

Additionally, the CMB co-produces the curricula for mandatory religious education in schools and universities, focusing on teaching world religions, with an emphasis on the history of Islam. These materials encompass not only a variety of religious views, including from Christianity and Judaism, but also secular worldviews, and aim to countering alternative religious movements.¹⁸

¹⁷ Bashirov, 'Islamic discourses'; Balci and Goyushov, 'Azerbaijan'.

¹⁸ Sophie Bedford, 'Islamic activism in Azerbaijan: repression and mobilization in a post-Soviet context' (dissertation thesis, Department of Political Sciences, Stockholm University, 2009).

Strategies of regulation

Azerbaijani state elites employ three strategies for interacting with faith-based organisations. The first is a strategy of control of faith and its presence in public spaces, in particular when it comes to new Muslim communities and oppositional Shia Islam. The second strategy comprises selected restrictions on non-traditional faiths with transnational ties, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Evangelical Churches, Krishnaism, and the Baha'i faith. The third strategy consists of strategic co-optation with those confessions that can be useful for elevating Azerbaijan's image on the international stage, in particular Judaism, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Lutheran Church, and Catholicism.

A strategy of control

The Azerbaijani government views religious communities as nonstate organisations that shape the regulatory dimensions of religious life. Over the last decade, the criteria for faith-based organisations to gain legal status have become very stringent. Until 2009, a group of eleven people could register a religious community by submitting an application with their signatures. Today, an application is accepted only if at least fifty signatures of Azerbaijani citizens support the creation of a religious community. The application also has to provide an address, details of public meetings, and the payment of a registration fee.

Azerbaijan amended its law on religious freedom significantly in 2015 and 2017. Strict re-registration requirements and bureaucratic procedures have become important instruments of state control over local and transnational Muslim religious groups. In this way, access to Sunni and Shia mosques has been limited during Ramadan and during larger international events such as the European Olympic Games in summer 2015 or the Formula One championships in 2016–2019. In 2015, a presidential decree ruled that religious symbols, slogans, and ceremonies may only be used and performed in places of worship, at sacred sites, or during official, state-orchestrated ceremonies.

Strict requirements have meant that performing traditional Shia Muslim Ashura mourning rituals outside mosques is now prohibited in Azerbaijan. Instead of the self-flagellation traditionally carried out on Ashura Day, an annual day of mourning for the martyr Husayn ibn Ali, the state promotes the performance of modern Ashura rituals held indoors. Blood donation has also been introduced as an alternative.

The same rule of indoor worship applies to other confessions. For instance, public Easter processions outside Russian churches have been prohibited in Azerbaijan. Since 2015, all religious buildings and prayer houses in the country have been claimed as state property.

In the view of Azerbaijani elites, Islam should be preserved as a cultural feature and part of the country's national heritage, rather than a social component and part of public life. As a former ideologue emphasised, faith is a matter of individual choice that should be practised in private.¹⁹ A trend

Religious ceremonies may be performed only inside of worship places, not in public spaces.

¹⁹ Interview with Rafik Aliyev, a former ideologue of the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, conducted by Tsypylma Darieva in Baku, March 2019.

of removing religious symbols from public spaces has led to a hierarchy of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ post-Soviet Islam in Azerbaijan.

A strategy of restriction

According to official documents and state decrees, the Azerbaijani authorities have developed a variety of restrictive instruments for all religious traditions. However, the authorities are especially cautious about the operations of so-called nontraditional religious communities and new transnational religious movements, which are often accused of pursuing long-term political goals.²⁰ Indeed, a divergence in religious discourse is apparent in the way the authorities treat traditional versus nontraditional communities. In contrast to the Russian Orthodox Church, Jehovah’s Witnesses and Charismatic Protestant Churches are regarded as external threats to Azerbaijan’s national security and bad Western influences on local traditions.

In 2014, an amendment to Azerbaijan’s constitution prohibited the spreading of religious propaganda and financial support for foreign religious organisations. A number of religious organisations, Protestant Churches, and other new Christian congregations have experienced the effects of this amendment. In particular, Evangelical Churches and Krishnaism have been unable to receive legal status in Azerbaijani society.

However, since the end of 2015, the government has started to review its repression of twelve nontraditional Christian communities. After a period of persecution, these organisations, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, have been approved for state registration. In light of Azerbaijan’s top-down multiculturalism policy, some Christian communities claim that their relationship with the state authorities has improved and that they have managed to secure official registration. Yet, other communities still face difficulties in getting registered or renting space for their ceremonies.

Registration is the state’s way not only of endorsing the existence of a religious community and indicating its purity in the eyes of the authorities but also of validating the community’s presence in terms of physical space and visibility. Once registered, communities may display a plaque or symbol on their building to mark their physical presence in a neighbourhood. Not all religious groups with buildings choose to do this: smaller nontraditional groups associated with new Christian communities, for example, prefer not to do this to protect the privacy of their followers.

The authorities are especially cautious about the so-called nontraditional communities and new transnational religious movements.

20 Scholars at Baku Research Institute (BRI), an independent research centre, have reported that Shia and Salafi Muslims make up most current political prisoners in Azerbaijan: forty-nine out of seventy were arrested because of their religious beliefs. See ‘Muslim believers in Azerbaijani prisons’, BRI Religious Studies Team, Baku Research Institute, <https://bakuresearchinstitute.org/muslim-believers-in-azerbaijani-prisons/>.

A strategy of co-optation

Four traditional non-Muslim religious communities and two nontraditional non-Muslim organisations are viewed by the state as useful for its international image and are not regarded as potential threats. These six communities and organisations are the Russian Orthodox Church, the community of European Jews, Georgian Jews, Mountain Jews (traditional), the Catholic Church, and Lutherans (nontraditional).

Azerbaijan lacks clear legal frameworks for the operation of sacred Shia folk sites, such as pilgrimage sites, saints' graves, and shrines, as they do not make up a specific religious community. Sacred folk sites are usually viewed within the domain of traditional folk beliefs and informal practices, which neither oppose nor merge with official mainstream religions. Indeed, they can be characterised as self-governed and their status seems to be negotiable.

However, there is a trend of introducing state authority over the management of sacred folk sites through the CMB, which has started to erect small mosques around popular shrines and pay a monthly salary to the sites' caretakers. At the same time, some selected shrines and sacred sites receive explicit state support and have been incorporated into narratives of national cultural heritage. To expand its power and assert its centralised presence, the Azerbaijani state supports the renovation and building of new mosques and sacred sites.

Alongside intense state monitoring, privileged religious communities receive a donation from the Presidential Fund. The amount is not fixed, and these communities receive far higher amounts than restricted nontraditional groups. For example, an imam at a mosque in Azerbaijan receives a state monthly salary of about 400 manat (\$235). In 2018, fourteen imams received a gift from the state of Azerbaijani-made Khazar cars. ► **FIGURE 7**

FIGURE 7
State gift – Khazar SD cars for fourteen imams

October 2019



Source: <https://www.trend.az/azerbaijan/society/2963329.html>

Popes at Russian Orthodox Churches do not receive a monthly income from the state.

Another instrument for co-opting religious groups is financial support to pay for heating costs and gas supplies at prayer houses. Following the ban on foreign missionaries introduced in the 2010s, all religious leaders must be citizens of Azerbaijan. However, the Catholic and Lutheran Churches seem to be exceptions, as they have special agreements with the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations and are allowed to invite foreign pastors from countries such as Germany and Slovakia. These strategic decisions give the Azerbaijani elites additional soft-power instruments with which to deal with international partners like Russia, Europe, Israel, and the United States.

Between faith and state in Baku

Azerbaijan’s capital city, Baku, provides empirical insights into the state’s processes of centralisation and its strategy of co-optation. A vibrantly developing regional metropolis on the Caspian shore, Baku serves as a special religious laboratory characterised by an uneasy return of the sacred to the public sphere and a strong presence of secular concepts.²¹ Two sites—the Heydar Mosque and the Church of the Saviour—manifest specific aspects of state intervention accompanied by Azerbaijan’s new discourse of united Islam and unique multiculturalism.

FIGURE 8
Heydar Mosque in Baku
Outside view, 2019



Source: Tsypylma Darieva

FIGURE 9
Heydar Mosque in Baku
The main prayer hall, 2019



Source: Tsypylma Darieva

21 The situation may look different in rural areas, in particular the Absheron Peninsula and southern regions of Azerbaijan, where the population is more homogeneous and social networks are denser. The metropolitan character of Baku provides more space for cohabitation of diverse communities.

The Heydar Mosque: a new national brand

Erected in 2015 in northern Baku, the Heydar Mosque is named after former president of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev. ► **FIGURE 8** The mosque is a manifestation of state-sponsored Islam and the goal of creating a good, tolerant Islam through observation of the state policy of multiculturalism. The mosque's maintenance falls under the direct supervision of Baku's executive and not the CMB, which does, however, appoint the mosque's imams.

The monumental status of the Heydar Mosque is reflected in the building's monolithic architecture, its solid, homogeneous materials, its ordered space, and its spacious car parks. The megamosque is protected from the surrounding environment by high walls and has only one entrance. The mosque's defining feature is its size: it has capacity for 5,000 worshippers.²² Four 95-metre-high minarets and a 55-metre-high dome, as well as a red carpet in the main prayer hall, decorate the mosque. ► **FIGURE 9** In front of the mosque is an oversized white marble book with Aliyev's signature on it.

This monumental mosque supports a new national brand of 'united Islam', as it offers a prayer hall for the simultaneous use of both Sunni and Shia Muslims. According to one of the mosque's imams, united prayer is the most remarkable feature of Azerbaijan's nationalised Islam:

„ We hired three Sunni imams and three Shia akhunds [clerics] at the Heydar Mosque; they pray at the same time on Fridays. This is our unique achievement. Our imams used to say that Islam was spread over the world from Mecca and Medina, and that unified Islam comes from Azerbaijan. This is what we call tolerance and multiculturalism. “²³

Although the mosque's leaders claim that on Fridays more than 2,000 people gather, the building remains entirely empty during the rest of the week. The place of worship is designed for large national and international events attended by religious and nonreligious guests, politicians, and tourists.

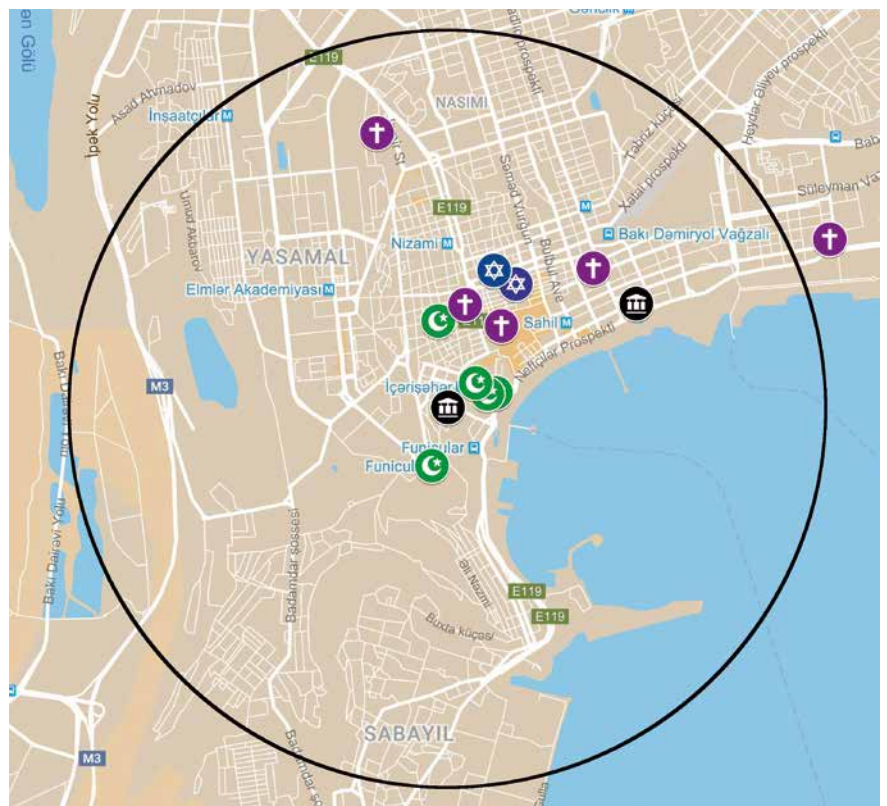
In 2017, the CMB's Council of Qadis decided to replace the term *akhund*, which was historically used in Azerbaijan as an official title for Shia clerics, with the term *imam*, which is used for officially appointed clerics in both Sunni and Shia mosques. The head of the CMB justified this decision with the fact that *imam* is a more commonly used term in the Muslim world, for example in Turkey. However, this move caused controversy among some independent Shia communities, which disapproved of the sharing of worshipping space. From their point of view, this represents an effort to suppress Shia Muslim identity in the country.²⁴ Two domains—faith and secularity—overlap in the Heydar Mosque in ways that may produce tensions, but they are not always opposing powers. ► **FIGURE 10**

22 The Heydar Mosque is not the largest of its kind in Eurasia: a new mosque in Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan, has a capacity of 10,000, and the Akmad Kadyrov Mosque in Grozny, Chechnya, can hold 17,000.

23 Interview with Rufat Garayev, one of the six imams at the Heydar Mosque, conducted by Aysham Balaeva, the authors' field assistant, in Baku, February 2019.

24 Balci and Goyushov, 'Azerbaijan'.

FIGURE 10
Mapping religious diversity in Baku
 Author's fieldsite locations, 2018



Source: Authors' own graph, supported by Denes Jäger

The Church of the Saviour: one place, multiple prayers

The Lutheran Church of the Saviour is located in central Baku. ► **FIGURE 11** Known as the *Kirkha*, the church was built in the neo-Gothic style between 1895 and 1897 by Adolf Eichler. Baku's Swedish-German community sponsored the construction, which was quite large for its time. The church was actively used for worship until the 1930s and survived the Soviet period.

Currently, the building is a concert hall for chamber and organ music and operates under the direction of the Azerbaijan State Philharmonic Hall. In 2010, the church was refurbished and certain elements of the church's interior, including the organ, were changed. ► **FIGURE 12** The massive metal entrance door was also replaced with a new one, which is now decorated with an eight-pointed star, the main symbol of independent Azerbaijan.

On Sundays, the church turns into a place of worship for four small Christian communities: Lutherans, Protestants, the New Life Church, and the Vineyard Church. These communities rent out the premises in turns of three hours every Sunday and may also organise other events in the building through the week if granted permission by the administrator. Religious communities may rent the church premises only if they are officially registered with the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations.

FIGURE 11
Church of the Saviour in Baku, Kirkha
 2019



Source: Tsypylma Darieva

FIGURE 12
Inside of the Church of the Saviour in Baku
 2019



Source: Tsypylma Darieva

Azerbaijan's revived Lutheran community, which is composed of descendants of the country's pre-Soviet German minority, was the first to reclaim the Kirkha and resumed its services there in 1994. For this community, the ability to hold services in this historical building has great symbolic significance as a marker of its German-Azerbaijani identity. Services are held in German and Russian. Under a special agreement with the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations in 2018, the church was given permission to operate under the leadership of a German pastor from Jena.

The Protestant community is officially the Azeri-language branch of the Lutheran community. It mainly brings together middle-aged and young people who identify as ethnic Azeris. The pastor of the community is an Azerbaijani national.

The New Life Christian Evangelical Church is a branch of the Belarusian New Life Church, which came to Baku in 2006. The church's notable distinction is that its leader is a woman—the only female pastor in all of Azerbaijan's Evangelical Churches. Services are held in Russian and Azeri.

The Vineyard neo-Charismatic Church is the fourth group to have Sunday services in the Kirkha. The group was established in 2013 and started its services in 2018 after registering with State Committee for Work with Religious

Organisations. The vast majority of the church's followers are young and middle-aged people from ethnically mixed groups, but most identify as Russian-speaking Azeris. The pastor holds services in Russian with consecutive interpretation into Azeri.

The sequence of services from traditional Lutheran to classic Pentecostal to neo-Charismatic worship, all in the same building on the same day, demonstrates the variety of spiritual engagements offered to Protestant Christians in modern Baku. It also confirms that the language used in church plays a decisive role in shaping the preferences of the parishioners and is the foundational marker of identity in the urban space.

Despite their social and theological differences, relations between the churches are mostly described as loyal and cooperative. Lutheran pastor Gothard Lemke emphasised the good interpersonal contacts maintained by the leaders of the religious communities:

„I must say that we have very good relationships with all other churches and religious communities. We have ecumenical relationships with Muslims. Sometimes we hold meetings between imams and priests. Sometimes we are gathered together by the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations State Committee on Religious Issues and the Centre for Multiculturalism in Baku for common celebrations and discussions.“²⁵

Conclusion

Secularism frames relations between faith and state in Azerbaijan by seeking to separate religious issues from the state, but in a specific form. The Azerbaijani state has adopted a secular response to the resurgence of religion by instrumentalising religious plurality and introducing repressive, bureaucratic methods of rule. This response has manifested itself in increasing governmental intervention, including a variety of measures to control religious issues and a top-down multiculturalism policy under the banner of preventing radical Islam. Recent religious diversity is not a return to pre-Soviet religious constellations but a new configuration shaped by external forces, globalisation, and a sociopolitical situation that leads to internal pluralisation within one confession.

Relations between the Azerbaijani government and religious communities have undergone a significant transformation, specifically a degree of centralisation within the boundaries of the nation-state. This has been a nonlinear transition, in which local elites and authorities channel and selectively diminish religious expression in public spaces and, at the same time, attempt to establish new standards for national spirituality. The state authorities claim to have a monopoly over defining and shaping religious life and its public expression in Azerbaijan.

Recent religious diversity is not a return to pre-Soviet religious constellations but a new configuration.

²⁵ Interview with Lutheran pastor Gothard Lemke conducted by Yulia Aliyeva in Baku, April 2019.

Discourses about a low level of religiosity, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ post-Soviet Islam, and the top-down policy of multiculturalism shape contemporary Azerbaijani policy on the governance of faith. This policy includes attempts to merge Sunni and Shia traditions into one national heritage, the appointment of religious leaders by state-sponsored institutions, the centralised renovation of mosques and churches, the introduction of monthly incomes for religious leaders, and mandatory religious education. While celebrating the new policy of tolerance by promoting a narrative on peaceful cohabitation between Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Azerbaijan, the state targets some prayer houses for restrictive control and persecution.

Generally, Azerbaijan’s state elites employ three main strategies towards faith and religious diversity. The first is control over faiths and their presence in public spaces, in particular new Muslim communities and oppositional Shia communities. The second consists of selected restrictions on nontraditional faiths such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, Evangelical Churches, Krishnaism, and the Baha’i faith. The third is strategic co-optation with faiths that are useful for Azerbaijan’s international relations, in particular Judaism, the Russian Orthodox Church, and Catholicism.

Given Azerbaijan’s authoritarian desire to create its own version of ‘proper’ Islam in a context of religious plurality, the state is likely to view society’s grass-roots religiosity as improper and label it nontraditional, underground activity influenced from abroad. In opposition to neighbouring theocratic Iran, Azerbaijan presents itself explicitly as a modern, secular nation-state. The introduction of a top-down policy of multiculturalism is an expression of Azerbaijan’s doctrine of strengthening ethno-national solidarity.

In the coming decades, the modern Azerbaijani state will face political and social challenges to redefine Islam as part of the country’s national heritage in the context of growing religious plurality. By attempting to remove religiosity from the public domain, Azerbaijan’s elites perceive religion as a political challenge and even a threat. It is likely that the elites want to position Azerbaijan on the global stage as a ‘good boy’ among the ‘bad boys’ of the Middle East, distancing Azerbaijani Islam from Middle Eastern and Arab Islam. The next question to ask is how effective Azerbaijan’s restrictive policy and co-optation strategy are in regulating underground Islam, plurality and the rise of informal religiosity.

Imprint

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Published by

© Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) gGmbH

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Citation

Tsypylma Darieva “Faith and state: governing religious plurality in post-Soviet Azerbaijan”, ZOiS Report 3/2020, (https://www.zois-berlin.de/fileadmin/media/Dateien/ZOiS_Reports/ZOiS_Report_3_2020.pdf)

ISSN 2512-7233

Layout

Yuko Stier

Cover image

Denis Karpenkov/
Alamy Stock Foto

