

Central Asia
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The religious situation in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan has been dramatically changing in recent years. Unlike in the Soviet times of total state control over religion, 'scientific atheism', suppression, and intolerance of believers, religion is currently enjoying conditions of relative freedom. Indeed, the constitution guarantees the freedom of religion as a right. Religious views and information have been very rapidly spreading among the population. Public interest in Islam, which has very deep historical and cultural roots and a rich spiritual tradition in Azerbaijan, has considerably increased in recent years, particularly among intellectuals and the youth. In fact, religion is becoming one of the most important factors of public life.

► **Participants of the public lectures on Islam for Russian-speaking intelligentsia.**

A number of vital theoretical and practical questions arise from the current circumstances of religion in Azerbaijan: What are the factors preconditioning the growing popularity of religious views among citizens? What is the degree and level of adherence to Islam and other religions? What is the concept of 'religion' in mass consciousness? How do people view the place and role of religion in public and private life? Finding answers to these questions led to the organizing and conducting of a large-scale sociological survey.*

The first stage of the survey was conducted from September 1999 to February 2000 in five regions of Azerbaijan, the number of respondents interviewed totalling 1,000 persons. The main purpose of the survey was to obtain comprehensive data concerning the peculiarities, dynamics and basic trends of religiosity in Post-Soviet Azerbaijani society, as well as to explore the basic sociological characteristics and parameters of public religious awareness and behaviour.

The respondents were distributed over the following religious affiliations: Islam, 94.0%; Orthodox Christianity, 3.7%; Judaism, 1.2%; and representatives of other religious confessions (Lutherans, Baptists, Catholics, etc.), 1.1%.

Judging from the data obtained, such typological groups of religiosity as 'believers' and 'hesitant' are dominant. The survey identified the following break-down of respondents depending upon their attitude towards religion (on the basis of their confessional self-identification). 'Believers' constituted 63.4% of all respondents, while 6.7% consider themselves even 'firm believers'; the groups of those hesitating between belief and non-belief comprised 10.4%; non-believers made up 7.1%; and 8.6% indicated being indifferent to this issue. Lastly, a small 3.8% of respondents consider themselves 'firm atheists'.

Dynamics of religiosity

It was important to follow up on the dynamics of the changing attitudes of the population towards religion over the last years. The data provide a rather complicated picture of the dynamics of religiosity in Azerbaijan, but in general it can be said that religiosity is on the increase. Some two-thirds of the respondents (62.0%) indicated having maintained their previous level of religiosity. Half of the respondents (52.3%) said that they were and still are believers, while 9.7% pointed out that they 'have never believed before and do not believe now either'. However, a third of the respondents (35.1%) confirmed having changed their views in the direction of greater religiosity and 9.3% said that they had never believed before, but have now become believers. One out of four (25.8%) respondents stated that he/she believed before, but has become more religious now. Finally, a very small portion of the respondents claimed to have estranged themselves from religion (1.9%) or to have changed their religion (1.0%).

Religiosity in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan A Sociological Survey



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A tenth of the respondents (10.4%) said that a 'tremendous importance' was attached to religion in their lives; while 26.1% of the respondents feel it occupies 'an important enough place' in their lives. Religion was conferred a 'moderate' role in the lives of 41.8% of respondents and an 'insignificant' role for 12.5%. Those for whom religion 'does not play any role at all' amounted to 9.2%.

The motives and reasons for religiosity amongst respondents are directly linked to a wide variety of factors. The first cluster is comprised of social and socio-psychological factors. Firstly, it seems that the family and immediate surroundings are relevant to one's religious experience: 15.7% of respondents indicated that their having adopted religion is explained by their 'family traditions, because this has been accepted in the family', while 16.1% of respondents affirmed that they were nurtured in a religious spirit since childhood and received a religious upbringing at home. For others, religion was more predetermined by their ethnic and cultural identity and thus acts as an element of national consciousness. In this vein, approximately one out of seven (14.2%) respondents adopted religion because it corresponds to their national customs and traditions. Adherence to Islam was explained by one out of five (19.7%) respondents by the fact that 'we are a Muslim nation and our entire nation is Muslim'. Among the individual and personal stimuli or reasons for adopting and practising religion, the most frequently encountered were the following: 'this helps moral self-perfection', 18.3%; 'it is easier for me to live this way, it has created an interest and meaning in life', 7.8%; 'this has become my inner need', 5.7%; and 'it has been caused by my personal life circumstances, personal hardship and difficulties', 1.9%. Among reasons for public interest in religion, there were also responses such as 'tribute to fashion' (0.6%) and 'ordinary human curiosity'. Clearly homogeneity does not exist in this complex of factors and circumstances, but future research into this matter could clarify the answers further.

Knowledge of the *shariah* and religious observance

Adherence to the Islamic faith envisions familiarization with the *shariah*. The respondents were asked about the extent of their knowledge of *shariah* rules and laws. A substantial 58.7% confirmed having 'a certain idea' and 16.8% feel they are 'quite well' fa-

miliar, 18.4% being 'absolutely unfamiliar with the *shariah*'. A mere 6.1% stated that they know the *shariah* principles 'very well'. In the survey context, the respondents were also asked about their understanding of some key dogmas, principles and understandings of Islamic belief (e.g. *Islam*, *iman* and *ibadat*). It turned out that very few have a clear understanding of the meaning and essence of these terms.

The observance of religious commandments varies: 6.3% of the respondents asserted that they fulfil all commandments in all life situations; 16.2% try to fulfil commandments to the greatest possible extent; 19.9% fulfil some of the commandments partially; and 57.6% do not fulfil them at all. The daily prayer is generally seen as one of the most important obligations for Muslims. The survey shows that 17.7% of 'believer' respondents pray the *namaz*. Correspondingly, 82.3% of the respondents do not abide by this core ritual. Another important obligation for believers is to observe the fast. The survey illustrated that 28.6% of believers fast during the Ramadan. Respondents also appear to respect the religious prohibitions of gambling (76.3%), eating pork (59.8%), and drinking alcoholic beverages (52.6%). The frequency of visits to mosques is one of the most obvious indicators of the level of religiosity. Respondents who visit mosques 'from time to time' totalled 35.1%; those who 'do not go to mosques at all' amounted to 32.8%; those who only visit mosques 'on holidays and special occasions' comprised 23.1%; while those 'permanently' at mosques totalled 6.4% and those that attend mosque 'every Friday' just 2.6%.

Role of religion in public life

The respondents were invited to express their opinions concerning the role religion currently plays in society and how its social impact has changed over the last several years. More than half of the respondents (54.4%) think the role of religion has been 'on the increase' recently, that it has 'started playing a more noticeable role in society'; while a mere 3.8% indicated that this role may be growing, 'but only for the time being'. A large share of the respondents (41.3%) believes that the role of religion in society and its social impact 'remain unchanged' (i.e. 'just like before, in the socialist time'). Only 4.3% of respondents feel the role and influence of religion at the present time 'is weakening'.

Respondents were asked to mention

spheres of the social life which, in their opinion, are to function according to religious regulations and norms. Religious influence is supposed to be distributed, in the respondents' views, over such spheres as 'public morality' (83.9%), 'culture' (70.6%) and 'family' (71.2%). Most consider religion not to be a factor in economic or political life in Azerbaijan, and a large majority suggested that neither economics (74.1%) nor politics (90.7%) should be influenced by religion on any account. This confirms the assumption that the concept of 'religion' at the level of public consciousness is predominantly considered in moral terms, having an ethical content. Religion is primarily regarded as a main and effective regulator of the everyday life and behaviour of Azerbaijanis, and not more.

Public perceptions of Islam

When asked about their opinions concerning the role of Islam in the historical, cultural and spiritual development of the Azerbaijan nation, the majority (62.7%), including some adherents to religions other than Islam, indicated seeing this role as an exclusively 'positive' one. In their comments, the respondents most frequently used the following arguments and comments: 'Islam gave the impetus to the development of national culture, science, philosophy, and art'; 'Islam has taught us to tolerate others'; 'we owe Islam all our merits'. A smaller part of the respondents (28.5%) implied that this role has been dual: in some sense as 'positive' and in another sense 'negative'. Only 6.9% see this role as 'not quite considerable' or as 'negative' (1.9%).

Overall, the empirical data illustrate the process of a growing level of religiosity of the Azerbaijani population. Over the last years, the process has assumed quite an intense and dynamic nature, which is reflected in the increased number of (practising) believers. Public opinion is giving a high assessment of the role and place of religion in public and private life. Moral and ethical interpretations and understandings of religion prevail in public consciousness. An important role is also played by traditional and ethnocultural components of religious perception. Another peculiarity of the present religiosity is intensification of the ritual and cult aspects of religion. At the same time, however, religious adherence is not always accompanied by the observance of rituals.

These research findings provide a basis for elaborating our understanding of the religious situation in such a transitional society as Azerbaijan. They may also serve as the point of departure for comparative analyses of religious situations in other post-communist countries.

Note

* The survey was carried out by the author of this article.

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