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PROBLEMS OF MUSLIM BELIEF IN AZERBAIJAN: HISTORICAL AND MODERN REALITIES

Religiosity in Azerbaijan, the country where vast majority of population are Muslims, has many signs different to what is practiced in other Muslim countries. This difference in the first place is related to the historically established religious mentality of Azerbaijanis.

Worth noting is that history of this country with its *Shia* Muslims majority and *Sunni* Muslims minority have registered no serious incidents or confessional conflicts and clashes either on the ground of inter-sectarian confrontation or between Muslim and non-Muslim population. Azerbaijan has never had anti-Semitism either; there has been no fact of oppression of Jewish people living in Azerbaijan for many centuries. One of the interesting historic facts is that Molokans (ethnic Russians) who have left Tsarist Russia when challenged by religious persecution and found asylum in neighborhoods of Muslim populated villages of Azerbaijan have been living there for about two hundred years and never faced problems as a religious minority. Besides historical and political reasons, this should be related to tolerance in the religious mentality of Azerbaijanis as well.

Features of religion in Azerbaijan: historical context

Most of the people living in Azerbaijan were devoted to Tengriism (Tengriism had the most important place in the old belief system of ancient Turks), Zoroastrianism and Christianity before they embraced Islam. Christianity was the official religion of Albanian State (2nd -7th centuries) which has a special place in Azerbaijani history. Religiosity of part of Azerbaijani Turks in Khazar Khaganate located in the northern territories around Caspian Sea (7th-9th centuries) also practiced Judaism which was a state religion.

Deep roots of religious tolerance are also found in the ethno-cultural heritage of Azerbaijanis. Azerbaijani religiosity by its essence has been grown on the ground of being influenced by heroes of Nizami Ganjavi's *Seven beauties*, folk love story of *Asli and Kerem*, Nasimi's poems glorifying Jesus Christ, M.Sabir's satires propagating real Islam and denouncing religious superstitions and fanaticism, N.Narimanov's *Bahadur and Sona*, Y.V.Chamanzaminli's *Ali and Nino* novels, J.Jabbarli's *1905*, H.Javid's *Sheikh Sanan* dramas and dozens of other literature works.

The main hero of *Sheikh Sanan* by Huseyn Javid (this playwright fell victim to Stalin regime's repressions in 1930s) is a leader of a Muslim religious community. He is ready to bravely accept all kinds of hardships for the sake of his beloved Christian girl Khumar as to meet the demands of Christian clergies forcing him to give up his Muslim identity by pasturing pigs, wearing a cross over his neck, drinking wine, etc. At last when embarrassed before a demand that he burn Koran to prove his religious conversion, he says I dare you do not put such a cruel demand because I am not sure you will be pleased with burning papers of Koran while it contains a lot of lovely verses about Jesus Christ and Mary the Virgin. Radical religious leaders challenged by this divine logic finally get forced to step back.

Kitabi-Dede Gorgud, an ancient heroic epos with 1300 years old history, introduces yet another important quality of historically shaped religiosity of Azerbaijanis. The religion of Gorgud's heroes is far from being a religion of foretellers, shrines, mullas and imams with no religious figures among them. They worship directly God, perform their prayers individually, there is no clergy guiding the ceremonies. The communication of Oguz Turks with God in the epos is very much different from the religiosity of those in the captivity of mysticism, or those spending all their days in shrines, or ascetics. The content of their communication with God is absolutely life-based thus gets granted to be welcomed by God. As it is said in *Bamsi Beyrek* chapter of the epos, "In those days, blessings of gentlemen were blessed and curses were met and came true. All their prayers would be responded by God". The main purpose of Muslim religion embraced by *Dede Gorgud* people is about serving firstly worldly salvation as to make the life more and more beautiful and meaningful, less and less burdened with sufferings. In this type of religiosity there is no room for hatred and aggression on a religious ground. No doubt, religious mentality of Azerbaijanis has been brought up by these kinds of popular literature pieces as well.

Tolerance is stable, resistant to politicization

Since the religiosity of Azerbaijani Muslims is of such a nature, the tolerance it embraces proves to remain stable and hence resistant to politicization, radicalization and religious intolerance. The other important factor supporting this nature of religiosity nowadays is secular character of the modern Azerbaijani society.

The majority of population who consider themselves Muslims does not observe traditional religious rituals such as daily prayers or fasting. Those who go for pilgrimage to Mecca constitute no more than 0.02-0.03 per cent of Muslim population. Practicing Muslims who observe rituals and follow the religious way of life constitute very small part of the population. The clergy are mostly engaged in mastering funeral ceremonies, reading *Ya-Sin* chapter of Koran in Arabic for the souls of the deceased and citing Prophet Muhammad's hadiths, etc.

The ritual that most of the Azerbaijani Muslims observe as their religious duty is visiting so called "pir"s – sanctuaries which can vary from pieces of nature including trees, rocks, mountains to places believed to have belonged to the saint with their burials like mosques, shrines or just graves.

There are number of toponyms including the word "pir" – sanctuary: *Pirallahy* (settlement near Baku), *Taza Pir* (mosque in Baku), *Pirqulu* (mountain in Shamakhy), *Pirabadil* (village in Devechi), *Piral* (village in Gusar), *Pirdiraki* (mountain in the north of Shamakhy), *Pirali Tepeleri* (heights on the right side of Gusar-Khudat highway), *Pirahmadli* (village in Fizuli), *Pirashraf* (cemetery near the village Sarihajili in Gabala), *Pirdagi* (mountain in Gadabey), *Pir Ashabi-Kaf* (cave in Nakhchivan), *Pir Beshbarmag* (mountain on the left side of Baku-Guba highway), *Pirshagi* (village in the outskirts of Baku), *Pirsaat Burnu* (Baku, Garadagh district, sea shore promontory), *Shikh Baba Pir* (in Shikhlar village, Jabrayil region), *Soltan Baba Pir* (Devechi region, Ugah village) [Hajiyeva, 2001], etc.

There are about 500 such *pirs* in Azerbaijan. People actively visiting a significant part of these pilgrimage places believe that many of them have healing power for the hopeless sick and many others help people to get their prayers on various matters addressing God accepted by Him. Pilgrimages to these sanctuaries people do to meet their religious needs present old religious habits which were inherent in the belief system of ancient Turks, the main predecessors of contemporary Azerbaijanis, and which got absorbed later on into an Islamic shape. Peculiar to that archaic belief system was that trees, mountains, stones, waters, forests were viewed by ancient Turks as living organisms to which they appealed asking for their help in dire times. Besides, there was a cult of forefathers' souls in the *Goy Tengri* belief of ancient Turks. They believed that persons having guided people hence gained and enjoyed love and respect of their compatriots will serve as their suppliants before God in their hereafter life along with serving their compatriots in this world as well after they pass away. The latter was part of the belief that spirits of prominent forefathers enter dreams of their compatriots, cautioning them against possible troubles and unpleasant events in the future. Ancient Turks had a pattern to build up tombstones in honor of those persons, and when praying in front of the tombstones thought they were communicating with the souls of the deceased and felt happy that they were not deprived of the assistance of the prominent personalities.

As a historical continuation of this belief there is a wide spread notion among Azerbaijani Muslims that people shall search for certain means by which to get High Creator's grace. These means are believed to be the souls of people who had a special value in the kingdom of High Creator who fulfills the prayers of ordinary people for the sake of those pure souls. The local clergy always refer to the following Koranic verses as to theologically underpin the notion in question: "O you who believe! Heed God, seek the means of approach unto Him, and strive in His path so that you may prosper" [Al-Quran, 5:35]

According to Azerbaijani Shias, the owners of mediator spirits are people called Sayyad's who are historical people of blood kinship with imams, descendants of Prophet Muhammad. For example, famous *Bibi Heybat pir* located in Shikh settlement at the western exit of Baku city is linked to the name of Hakima khanim, the daughter of the seventh imam Musa Kazim and the sister of the eighth imam. Hakima khanim lived in the early ninth century, came to Azerbaijan since her brother imam Rza was persecuted and lived under the name of *Bibi Heybat* ("Heybat's aunt") in order not to be identified. Now *Bibi Heybat* is the name of a mosque functioning in the place regarded as a *pir*. The mosque is situated close to the highway from Baku to the Southwest of Azerbaijan and one can usually observe how travelers driving by pull their cars up and give alms to the *pir* and go on with their drive after that. They believe God will protect them from car accidents on the roads for the sake of respect to Hakima khanim's soul due to alms (usually this constitutes some Azerbaijani manats) given to the *pir*, which is supposed to be spent for religious purposes or to help the poor.

The other *pir* people of Baku and Absheron peninsula visit in great numbers is *Mir Movsum Agha* sanctuary. He is seyyid as well. His family roots are said to be descending from the family of Khalifa Ali ibn Abu Talib, father of Imam Huseyn. He lived in Baku in the second half of the twentieth century. According to the witnesses, his ability to cure the ill, successful performance of spiritual guiding mission as a mediator between God and people to fulfil their wishes and his other miracles served for a spiritual ground of trust people put on him being sanctified. Witnesses who talk about dozens of such miracles tell one interesting story as well about how the local Soviet authorities once sent a truck to *Mir Movsum Agha's* house to confiscate his property under the pretext that he did not pay taxes on the alms that people gave to him. They placed everything he had at home to the truck. But the driver could not start the truck which was in a perfect condition. Taken aback by implausible fear, the comers accompanying the driver had to return all his property back. And following this was that the truck started to work... Now there is a big mosque operating in the place where *Mir Movsum Agha* is buried. His grave

has become a great pilgrimage place. During the Muharram month, especially on the day of Ashura ceremony, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims from Baku and Absheron peninsula visit this sanctuary. Mir Movsum Agha's photographs are kept at the houses of the local Muslim believers as bearers of his soul.

Currently, pirs are being restored by the authorities. Moreover, new ones are being built as well. For example, the house of a person called Seyyid Yusif Agha who died in 2005 in Barda region was a place of pilgrimage of people in his lifetime and still serves the same purpose. Respected in the region by his compatriots, he was appealed as a judge of his kind to help solve various conflicts between people, listened to their wishes and made prayers for their wishes to be fulfilled by God. Once I happened to visit his house in 1995. The reason was that I had to talk to him on a private matter. He met me and a person accompanying me with a lighting smile. He thought of us as ordinary pilgrims and launched the conversation. During our talk I presented him with my Koranic translation in Azeri with my autograph. He could hardly see with the eyes grown weak with the age so he took the book and secluded into his room. After a while he came back and expressed his admiration by the book, talking on how the former Soviet authorities used to ban religious education. Then he extended to me his hand with certain amount of money and his photo, saying "take and spend this money, it will bring you a good luck, keep the photo in your pocket, it will protect you from sufferings"... Now after his death his grave is visited as a *pir*, people come to visit his house where his son meets the visitors. Responding to a petition filed by his fellow villagers with the Azerbaijani parliament the latter changed the name of his village "Janavarly" into "Seyyid Yusifli". This example in addition to some state expenditure on restoration and betterment of pirs can be taken as a proof of support the Azerbaijani authorities give to the traditional "pir" belief.

Although this "pir pilgrimage" religiosity has religious meaning what is obvious is that it is not without a secular nature either since it is mainly aimed at fulfilling secular wishes strongly linked up to daily cares of people within the realities of secular life hence has nothing to do with concepts on next world human salvation claiming values which traditionally constitute the main religious ideology of monotheistic religions. Therefore we tend to think that longevity of this kind of religiosity, which has passed down through the years of the related religious practices having developed into certain religious habits, is mostly provided by the factor concerning its aforementioned secular nature.

One of the main reasons that makes Muslim religiosity in Azerbaijan rather different compared to other countries with deep roots of Islamic traditions (Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Arab countries, etc.) is that the country does not have deep historic traditions of institutionalized or structuralized Islam as the latter in former Soviet countries could only exist at a social level during an almost 70-year reign of atheistic ideology.

Emergence of Muslim religious centers and institutions coincides in fact with the period of Russian colonialism in Azerbaijan. The Czarist political circles understanding that political plans for Christianization of the population would not succeed in this occupied country preferred to create a foundation for structuralization of Islam by establishing a wide network of '*medrese*'s, Muslim religious schools, and bringing up clergy loyal to the state. It was considered that the colonial politics aiming at keeping control over the religiosity of Azerbaijanis could be easily pursued through the religious structures and religious education institutions established by the central authorities.

Measures on putting the Islamic education under the state control were also part of the religious policy of the independent Azerbaijan Republic which existed in 1918-1920. This policy was held then by the Ministry of Education and Belief. *Azerbaijan* newspaper, the media outlet of this Ministry, wrote that sharia lessons would have a positive impact on students as to cultivate their mind in the spirit of respect to higher ideals, justice, truth, elderly people [Huseynli, 2002] etc.

Followed by Soviet occupation of Azerbaijan, the Islamic education network underwent a serious blow. With the fall of the national statehood all kinds of religious education became prohibited. According to a decision taken by the People's Education Commissariat of the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan on 10th of May, 1920, sharia lessons were outlawed in public and private schools [Gahramanova, 1993: 49].

Situation with the Islamic education started to change in the years of *perestroika* in the USSR. According to a decision of the USSR Cabinet of Ministers, Baku Islamic *medrese* was opened up in the capital of Azerbaijan in 1989. Later this school transformed into the Baku Islamic University. Currently the other higher Islamic education institution in Azerbaijan is Theology Department of Baku State University.

Late 1980s and early 1990s marked the rise of democratic movement for national independent statehood. This struggle addressing national and historic values was accompanied by calls for restoration of Islamic values as well. The main reason for return tendencies to Islam was first of all conditioned by a religious vacuum that existed over the past years of atheism. The protesters at mass meetings against the local Soviet authorities demanded that the premises of the mosques ever used as storages, libraries and other facilities be given back to the disposal of local Muslim believers. New mosques were built almost in all the regions of the country at the expense of donations from the local people. Organized in mosques, Sharia and Koran courses gradually transformed into *medreses*.

These local religious centers often operated then out of control of Caucasian Muslim Board (CMB). The latter is responsible for stability in the religious situation and careers of Muslim clergy. Religious literature being multiplied at simple printers was widely distributed among the population. Mass interest in the religious topics caused attempts to translate Koran into Azerbaijani as well. The author of this article along with other famous orientologists of the country had his own version of Koranic translation in Azeri published at the time. Intellectual contribution of Azerbaijani scholars to religious enlightenment activity implied to satisfy the religious needs of people as to link these needs up to the tasks of the national democratic movement for independent national state by means of impact on religious consciousness of people. This had some political sense at this point. There were also many other contributions made by Azerbaijani *intelligentsia* to religious enlightenment works which generally failed to enter the content of common political discourse in the country. As for religious propaganda of non-state sponsored religious centers, this started to consist of no more than the religious interpretations dating back to centuries past.

Foreign factors to politicize religion

Interference of influential religious circles of neighbouring Muslim countries into the religious situation in Azerbaijan caused emergence of new religious sects in the country. Attempts of foreign emissaries to teach religion to Azerbaijanis who were distanced from Islam during the Soviet period pursued explicit political goals. If during the *perestroika* years the local Muslims were building mosques in different regions of the country at their own money and the quick translations of Koran by local orientologists was anyhow massly published at the expense of local fundings, later during the first years of national independence Iranian, Turkish and Arab capital was brought in to finance construction of mosques and various religious literature was exported from foreign Muslim countries. For example, religious books published in Iran in *Cyrillic* were at that time very popular among the population.

Certain religious circles in secular Turkey were also present in the religious situation and were involved in religious confrontation with Iran. Emissaries from Arab countries were also frequent guests in Azerbaijan. Thus it took a short period of time for traditional religiosity of some Azerbaijanis to develop into and acquire the features of *Nurjism*, *Vahhabism* and politicized *Shiism* under the foreign influence. Those new religious movements brought into Azerbaijani realities established their social base consisted of the local Muslim believers by means of formation of legal, semi-legal and at times illegal educational network of Islam. Besides, Azerbaijani youth had access to higher educational centers of Islam in Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Jordan, Pakistan.

Undoubtedly, attempts to politicize religion and manifestation of religious radicalism among Azerbaijani Muslim believers at present are directly linked to the foreign factor. It is also a fact that some Azerbaijani students after having finished their education at foreign Islamic centers upon their return to the home country join the radical religious trends. This in some cases results in clash of different religious views or interpretations of some religious postulates, accompanied by mutual accusations of infidelity, etc.

For example, if theological arguments I come up with in my capacity of an author of Koranic translation and a scholar engaged in modern Islamic theology in favor of rethinking or reconsidering some of historic Islamic Sharia items in the light of the Koranic verses are met with the relevant understanding by most of the people, I face acute criticism and be accused of blasphemy at best and death threats at worst from the people and the religious structures claiming to represent Islam. One of these threats was made in 2005 by an akhund (a minor religious title for Shia clergy) in one of Baku mosques in his religious sermon when he identified me as a *persona non-grata* among Muslims and called for *jihad* against me. It was clear that *jihad* in the interpretation of that akhund meant a physical violence and later it was proved. After having finished one of my regular religious talks at "Space" radio channel, I was approached by two unknown young men who told they represented "Ahli-Beyt" group and their group members were not happy with my talks. Then they let me know among the group members there were some who intended to make short work of me. Trying to hold a dialogue with them in the context of Islamic enlightenment work I attempted to convince them both that such kind of moves were opposite to the essence of our religion. Their response was: "you are an infidel in the eyes of our community". I was offered to change my views on Muslim women's headscarf; otherwise I would face serious consequence. Following this warning I got yet another threat when I finished my talk on "Space" TV. What happened was that in a few minutes right after my talk I received a phone call to my cellphone from a person who threatened me by murder for my views on women's headscarves [Forum 18 News Service, 2005].

Attempts to radicalize Azerbaijani religiosity through foreign influence are more evident against background of politicization of Islam. For example, main activities of groups affiliated with Iranian political and religious establishment are aimed at causing sympathy among the population towards political version of Shiism which never existed in Azerbaijan before, and shaping the religiosity of the Azerbaijani Shias accordingly in line with Islamic sharia rules applied in Iran.

I chaired a seminar this year on the topic of “Islam and nationalism” in Baku. Attendees among others were also the representatives of the Azerbaijan Islamic Party. One of them expressing his conviction against any kind of nationalism stated that the religiosity of Muslims has to be based on “love for truth, hate to falsehood” [Islam and Nationalism, 2011]. No doubt, such religiosity stipulates for a worldview deprived of tolerance. Truth in their interpretation is intrinsic in the value system shaped through their own religious ideas while falsehood in their mind is reflected in all the things going beyond these ideas. As for hatred to falsehood it might nevertheless extend to terrorism as well.

In 2006, Rafiq Taghi, one of the famous Azerbaijani writers, published a sarcastic article about Prophet Muhammad in *Sanat* newspaper [Taghi, 2006: 119]. Both the author and the editor of the newspaper were arrested for the article. Political Islamists active in Nardaran, the suburb of Baku, clearly voiced at the demonstrations their demand to execute the author. Just on the eve of that event ayatollah Lankarani, a famous Iranian cleric, issued in his turn a death fatwa on Rafiq Taghi. [Declaration of Ayatollah, 2011]. This fatwa clearly showed how small political Shia groups operating in Azerbaijan enjoyed support from Iran. Despite the fact that the author apologized for his article, his apology was multiplied in local newspapers and covered on TV, and the writer had a right to be excused in accordance with Koran’s *tauba* (repentance) teaching, all this proved not enough for those who had asked for a death penalty or a life sentence. After 8 months of imprisonment with a presidential pardon, he was released. Rafiq Tağı died on November 23, 2011 of a knife injury received on November 19 in a car park near his home. The murderer said to be linked to Iranian political circles has not been brought to justice yet.

One of the signs of Iranian influence over a certain segment of the local Shiite population clearly was reflected in their reaction to the recent killing by the US military of Qasem Soleimani, the commander of the elite Iranian “Quds” Special Forces Corps of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard. Commenting on the sorrow of some residents of the country over this killing, Azerbaijani scholar Yasamen Garagoununlu, named them “the fifth column of Iran” [Turan New Agency, 2020].

Besides what refers to the political version of Shiism, there are manifestations and networks of non-traditional religiosity belonging to a local *Salafism* developed under the influence of Arab countries. This religious trend also strives to advance in the religious market of Azerbaijan but does not seem to be as much successful as their Shiite counterparts. Its spread among some local Muslim believers came to be also through their education network¹ which was created under the umbrella of Arab charity organizations in 1990s. These very charity institutions organized Arabic language courses and spread religious literature on *Salafism* among the local Muslims. Operating in Baku at the time in favor of Salafi teaching were education centers of World Islamic Youth Assembly and International Islamic Rescue Union. These centers operating as well as in the camps of refugees from the territories occupied by Armenia, were closed down by the local authorities after the well-known September 11 attacks in the USA.

The Azerbaijani government carried out a number of activities for the purpose of controlling the religious situation and protecting it from foreign influences. These activities included listing religious education entities for the official registration, making an examination of their curriculums for their conformity with local laws. All these measures resulted in Arab charity organizations starting to leave the country since the beginning of the new millennium with their religious education centers left behind to be closed soon. Currently, *Salafism* being challenged by the government’s religious politics try to look for new ways of self-assertion in the local religious market. For example, *Salafism* is taught with the hidden agenda in private apartments. Azerbaijani Muslims are offered to follow such version of ruling ideology in Arabian Peninsula that in their opinion is closer to divine truth and more authentic than other Islamic trends and sects. The arguments of Salafism based on refusing all signs of idolatry, including the kinds believed to be belonging to various versions of Shiism and Sunnism makes it more attractive and argument-based in the eyes of some local Muslims.

During talks I happened to hold with Azerbaijani Salafism who usually try to stay away from political processes, I witnessed on numerous occasions how openly they show their sympathy with the Arab countries.

These examples prove once again that limited radicalism signs in the religious thought mostly stem from certain geopolitical realities beyond the country and by no means are caused by its local historic and cultural developments. Therefore, they look weak and with no prospects when considered against background of traditional religiosity of the Azerbaijani Muslims and secular potential of the Azerbaijani society on a large scale.

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¹ Information on salafism and political shiism is based on the personal investigations of the author.

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Problems of Muslim Belief in Azerbaijan: Historical and Modern Realities

The article deals with the problem of formation and functioning of Muslim religious communities in Azerbaijan. Through the example of communication between Shi'a Muslims, Sunnis, and Christians (molocans), the author seeks to demonstrate ways of understanding and forging dialogue in the post-Soviet country. However, the acute angles and problems that arise in different religious communities during the joint communication both within one religion and other religious denominations are not neglected. In this context, in particular, the focus is on internal movements within Sunni and Shii muslims.

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Проблеми мусульманської віри в Азербайджані: історичні та сучасні реалії

У статті розглядається проблема становлення та функціонування релігійних общин мусульман в Азербайджані. На прикладі комунікації між представниками мусульман шиїтів, сунітів, а також християн (молокан) автор намагається продемонструвати шляхи порозуміння та формування діалогу у пострадянській країні. Однак не залишається і поза увагою гострі кути та проблеми, які виникають у різних релігійних общин під час спільної комунікацій як всередині однієї релігії так й інших релігійних конфесій. Зокрема у цьому контексті основну увагу приділено на внутрішні рухи у межах сунізму та шиїзму.

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