Dobrosława Wiktor-Mach

Religious Revival and Secularism in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan

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ikhtilāf al-umma raḥma
(Difference within the Islamic tradition is the sign of God's mercy)

– the Prophetic tradition

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Note on Transliteration

Arabic terms related to Islam have been transcribed into English using the standard scientific transliteration system devised for the Deutsche Morgenländischen Gesellschaft. Following the recommendation of the Chicago Manual of Style (1982) that "familiar words and phrases in a foreign languages should be set in roman type," Arabic words that can be found in a standard English dictionary are treated as belonging to international English. The words such as Islam, Koran, jihad, sharia, for instance, are written as they are, instead of *Islām*, *Qurʾān*, *ǧihād*, and *šarīʿah*. Since familiarity is relative, in some cases I have made a decision about transliteration in an arbitrary way. Some terms and concepts employed in this work have Arabic roots but in Azerbaijan are used in their Turkic or Persian variants; in that case I adhere to a simple transliteration. The plural of more familiar Arabic words is formed by adding 's' to their singular forms (e. g., "fatwas" and "hadiths.") Most of these words with short explanations are included in the glossary at the end.

Transliteration of Russian has been done in the system developed by the United States Board on Geographic Names and by the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names for British Official Use.

Names of public figures, places and organizations are written according to their most common English spellings. For instance Aliyev, Baku, Caucasus Muslim Board. In some cases my choice was rather arbitrary as there is not one accepted form, in other individuals changed their names themselves and are referred to by both names as for example Nasib Nassibli, born as Nasibzade, who worked as Azerbaijan's ambassador to Iran.

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Introduction

This book came into being as a result of an interest in a world religion that has over 1.6 billion adherents, or 23% of the world's entire population. Despite the enormous geographical, social and political diversity of the Muslim world, Islam is commonly perceived as a cultural monolith in which Arab perspective on religion prevails. There is a great need in our time to shed more light on the inner complexities and nuances that are typical of each major religion, as they again, since the 1970s, reemerge as significant social and political forces. The revival of religion and its deep impact on the public life is a phenomenon characteristic of our times. At the beginning of the 21st century Islam is surrounded by numerous stereotypes and prejudices, even on the part of elites. In the West, Islamophobia is on the rise and the knowledge of Islam superficial. Few associate Islam with democracy and modernity, even fewer with secularization.

This book focuses on the phenomenon of competition inside Islam in Azerbaijan. Shia and Sunni Muslim movements and groups try to attract people to their religious branches. Salafis promote the "pristine" Islam with a global appeal. Shias, on the other hand, underline rationality in their faith tradition. There's a growing popularity of the Turkish model of Islam. Sufism, although not as powerful as before, finds also a committed audience. Competition requires at least a minimum level of pluralism and an active engagement of religious actors. Even though during communism there were more forms of religion than officially allowed by the state, it was not until the end of the Soviet Union that Islam revealed its variety in the Muslim-majority republics. After seventy years of imposed secularism and atheism, religion could eventually find its place in the public sphere. Novel possibilities were quickly exploited by many groups, communities and individuals proposing their interpretations of religions. The inner struggle between various branches and their representatives became a fascinating account of power relations grounded in political, economic and sociocultural contexts. Also symbols play a significant role. Forms of religions are in a constant flux, they emerge under certain conditions, evolve, face challenges from political power, from science and other ideologies and also from other religious actors ready to take part in the game. New religious movements and groups challenge existing practices, ideas and structures, offering believers additional choices, novel ideologies, as well as services, and social networks. Some religious communities give up, losing adherents, some adjust to meet the changing demands for religion and its forms, others flourish and gain fervent supporters. The contemporary Islamic resurgence offers a living laboratory of religious

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change, its determinants and effects. Islamic movements and communities act not only in a particular socio-economic context but, what's equally important, they respond to each others' moves and actions. They operate in a common religious market, propose reinterpretations of Islam responding to the needs of post-communist societies. Global religious movements adjust to the local context and experiences. Their actions are not independent, but take place in a constant, more or less conscious, process of interaction and mutual inspiration, or conflict.

The competitive process does not help us understand all the aspects of religious transformation or evolution. It must also be acknowledged that a religious revival may result from various factors, not only those postulated in the religious market theory. When the cold war eventually finished, hundreds of local conflicts appeared. In the Caucasus, since the early 1990s there were Chechen-Russian wars, which also spilled to other neighboring republics. Radical Islam appeared and was a powerful factor in the military conflicts. The Northern Caucasus was destabilized, filled with violence, cruelty and terror. Georgia has experienced a loss of a large part of its territory and a war with Russia in 2008. Ethnic conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan led to a bloody war over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region. The ceasefire which was signed in 1994 began a new era of hostile relations between those two countries, and the so-called "frozen conflict" lasts till now. Mass displacements of people followed the war and the problem of hundreds of thousands of refugees and IDPs remains unsolved. They lack perspectives for the future for them and their children and live often in poverty. The road to capitalism was also steep and turbulent, and for many people in the region the economic transformation hasn't brought benefits. Unemployment and low salaries are only some of the large number of socio-economic problems in the post-Soviet Caucasus. In many studies of religion such harsh conditions of living and the constant feeling of anxiety and uncertainty are regarded as factors conducive to the rise in religiosity.

This book, however, focuses on other issues and scrutinizes inter-religious competition as a force which inevitably leads to a better understanding of religious change. Other topics, although equally important and interesting, would make this project too vast, so I had to make a decision to limit my research into specific areas which are less known. Competition between religious groups and their leaders is in the market theory of religion one of the key factors in explaining the evolution of religion, its doctrines and institutional forms. If we want to be able to better understand our times, or predict how the religious landscape will look in the future, we shall closely monitor which religious actors gain popularity and authority among believers (or un-believers), and which lose. And

why is it so, what are the reasons behind these processes. The outcome of an ongoing competition determines to a large extent the evolution of religion and societies.

Among the biggest global challenges in the 21st century is the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. The Salafi movement, although it is heterogenous and encompasses various attitudes, in the West is widely regarded as a serious threat to security and stability. It is seen as an undermining of liberal democracy and the rule of law. As radicalization among some Muslim groups is on the rise, the Western world is looking for "moderate" or "liberal" Islam to engage with in countering fundamentalist ideologies. There is an increasing appreciation of pluralism inside Islam among public opinion and journalists, especially after September 11, 2001, but the essentialist view of Islam and Islamic law is prevailing. Huntington's thesis of the clash of civilizations has found many supporters who use his idea for political gains. A closer scrutiny of Muslim civilization reveals, however, how divided in many aspects this world is. One of the most spectacular ideological splits is among the Islamic modernists and fundamentalists who have had a long history of debate on the interpretations of Islam, compatibility of sharia with liberal democracy and modernity. Globalization with more intense social communication has only intensified intra-religious encounters, discussions and often conflicts.

Azerbaijan is the main focus of the book. One may wonder, why this particular country. There are at least two reasons for exploring the inner transformation of the Islamic world on the basis of this small Caucasian state. First of all, research on this country provides an excellent opportunity to study the process of reinforcement of Islam in the social space. This post-Soviet country is considered to be one of the most secularized in the Muslim world. According to a Pew Research Center estimate, Azerbaijan has the lowest percentage of Muslim citizens supporting sharia out of 38 Muslim countries surveyed. Only 8% of Azerbaijani Muslims are in favor of making Islamic law the official law in their country. Even among some Central Asian countries, such as Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan, support is significantly stronger. On the other hand, the overwhelming majority of Muslims in Sub-Saharan Africa, MENA, South and Southeast Asia generally accept sharia and would agree to be governed by it (The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society, 2013). Thus, all aspects of religious activity, especially in the public sphere, are clearly visible against this background, and that is the starting point for modern pluralism in that region. The landmark change in the religious situation took place with the fall of the Soviet Union. When Azerbaijan regained independence in 1991, freedom in religious law enabled numerous missionaries and religious groups mainly from Iran, Turkey, Russia, and Arab countries to establish their presence and promote their traditions. Soon, Islam in the

South Caucasus became extremely diversified, and the struggle over the meaning and practices that can be called Islamic began.

Another reason for choosing Azerbaijan as the focus of the study is that, unlike Arab countries, the post-Soviet Muslim sphere remains relatively understudied. While most debates on Muslim religion today draw heavily on the Arabic Islamic "heartlands," a lot of important developments take place in the non-Arab Muslim world, e. g., in Indonesia (a country with the largest number of Muslims in the world), Asia, or the Caucasus. The focus on Arabs as the main actors in contemporary Islam is unjustified in social sciences from the demographic point of view. Only about 20 % of the global Muslim umma is located in the Middle East-North Africa region. The major region inhabited by Muslims is Asia-Pacific, with over 60 % of the global population of Islamic believers (Mapping the Global Muslim Population, 2009). It is thus probable that the features of contemporary and future Islamic culture are being determined mostly in non-Arab Muslim societies.

Religious revival and the return of religion to the public sphere consists in the enhanced activities of a variety of Islamic groups, preachers, theologians and activists. Transnational Islamic movements search for means to enlarge their outreach. They have global ambitions, which inevitably leads to conflict. This perspective of looking at religion draws upon the works of, among others, Geertz (1971) and his comparative study of Islam in two places: Morocco and Indonesia. Important work has been done by anthropologists of Islam gathered around the figures of Abdul Zein (1977) and Talal Asad (1986). This approach focuses on lived practices and discourses and their developments in specific historical and political circumstances. It is the study of a social side of religion, not a theological one. It shows the activities of people engaged in developing and transmitting religious teachings, the factors that affect the spread of ideas and interpretations, and decisions of average believers having their own interests and preferences.

For instance, an anthropological interpretation of Islamic law focuses on the discourse about sharia. In the post-Soviet context an interpretation of religious law is strongly influenced by the decades of imposed secularization. Many religious Muslims in Azerbaijan who are familiar with Islamic law support the current secular political system. In their view, most of Islamic values and norms are already guaranteed by the constitution, without calling them "sharia," and thus there is no need for an Iranian-style regime.

This approach advocated, among others, by Talal Asad (1986) can shed new light on the religious revival in post-Soviet Muslim societies. The contemporary academic discussions on Central Asian Islam are either underlining the uniformity of Islam or make use of some simplistic dichotomies. Analyzing the para-

digms informing the scholarly representations of Soviet Islam, Mark Saroyan (1997) criticized the common thesis of "two Islams," i. e., official versus unofficial, which are in opposition and even in hostility towards each other. This thesis is still repeated in a present discourse, but the opposing terms are different. On the two sides of the present barricade there are "traditional" and "untraditional" or "fundamentalist" forms of Islam. As in the past, these marks are closely related to the ideological interests of a state that differentiates between those Muslims who are willing to cooperate and legitimize the political power and those who are more inclined to oppose it.

To counterbalance this kind of representation, I propose to approach Islam in that area as encompassing several interpretations or, using Asad's concept, discursive traditions. Only then we can account for various trends and processes that are transforming Muslim communities. While most apparent is the division into Sunni and Shia traditions, there is a need for further differentiation. In the analysis of past religious developments in Azerbaijan, I have focused on the processes shaping those two traditions, but also on Sufism and later trends in Islamic understandings that emerged under Russia's influence. In the case of contemporary Azerbaijan, the most influential are Islamic models shaped by the national contexts of Turkey, Iran and Arab countries. Another distinguishable trend is Islamic reformism, with local ideas of modernization. Besides, we can distinguish secular tradition, by which I understand the non-orthodox and often syncretic Muslim identity which nonetheless includes some elements of religious engagement.

One of the most vital changes Islam in the Caucasus has been experiencing is the ongoing process of Sunnitization. In Azerbaijan there is an intense competition taking place between various branches of Shiism and Sunnism. For centuries, the Shia branch had more influence on society and Iran used to safeguard its interests. However, the future of Shiism, which is typically associated with both Iran and Azerbaijan, is uncertain, at least in the Caucasus. With the religious revival in the post-socialist Muslim republics the struggle for "secularized Muslims" began and the traditional power relations are being deeply challenged.

At the beginning of the 21st century the most popular mosque in Baku was the Abu Bakr mosque. Located at Ulvi Bunyadzade Street in Baku, the mosque became extremely popular with Muslims not only from the capital but also from the wider region. There were sometimes as many as 8000 people gathered for the Friday prayer. That stood in a stark contrast to many traditional mosques attended by only a couple of Muslims. What makes the Abu Bakr mosque, known also as the Sunni Juma mosque, so popular was mainly its charismatic leadership and the community that emerged around it. The imam of the mosque, Haji Gamet Suleymanov is a graduate of the World Islamic University of Medina

and a follower of Salafism. Under his guidance, this branch of Islam made its spectacular inroads into a mostly younger, urban segment of the Azerbaijani society. That was a revolution, a radical change. Thousands of people were moved by Suleymanov's teachings and joined, more or less formally, the Salafi community. He proposed a path of spiritual and moral development and a distance from politics. New language, new context, new inspirations. However, during the peak of its popularity a terrorist attack took place. On August 17, 2008, a grenade was thrown into the mosque during the evening prayer. There were casualties and the attack was attributed by the government to terrorists. The mosque was subsequently closed and the massive "conversions" to Sunnism halted for a while. Nevertheless, since it had so many adherents, it was difficult to stop the process. Sunni Salafism has been proliferating and it is changing the religious structure of the Azerbaijani society.

There are also other Sunni movements and groups which actively promote their model of Islam. Turkey has been actively engaged in religious affairs in Baku. Due to ethnic and linguistic proximity, for Azeris the Turkish model of religion is an attractive one, more attractive than the Iranian model. Among Turkish movements, the Gülen's movement, named after its central figure Fethullah Gülen, is exceptionally successful. It acts through educational institutions established in Central Asia and the Caucasus as well as through business networks and media channels. Again, it appeals especially to the younger, more educated parts of society. The movement's popularity may encounter serious problems because of the events of the coup attempt in Turkey which took place on 15 July 2016. Afterwards, the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan accused Gülen and his supporters of masterminding the attack.

Shiism is, however, not giving up. New interpretations and reinterpretations of the Shia ideology appear. Shiites put emphasis on rationality and try to present their religious model as more rational and intellectually rewarding to believers. Charismatic leaders on the Shiite side are actively engaged in intra-religious competition. The Shia community led by Haji Ilgar Ibrahimoglu is one of the most vibrant and active community. Apart from religious ideas, it does not refrain from getting involved with important public issues, such as the human rights of religious people.

The religious revival taking place in the whole post-Soviet is not a simple return to the past, as the term may suggest. There is a new aspect to it, an aspect of global interconnectedness. There is an unprecedented plurality of choices and the new means of communication technology make the flow of religious ideas and ideologies rapid and enormous in scope. The inner-religious competition is today probably more intense and wide-ranging than ever before. Those processes are clearly seen in Baku—a capital city on the western coast of Caspian

Sea. “The most secularized Muslim capital” has now been taking a lead in the process of religious renaissance. The future of Islam in that part of the world will be determined, to a large extent, on the Absheron Peninsula.

Chapter 1
Religion as a Field of Competition

Among many approaches in the social study of religion, a relatively recent one—the economics of religion—has many advantages in shedding new light on the religious revival taking place all around the world. The idea of applying the science of economics to explain patterns of religious activity and the place of religion in society can be traced to Adam Smith. He is regarded as a pioneer in taking a keen interest in functioning of what is now called the religious marketplace. A lot of reflections and discussions in Book V of his "An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations" (1776) is devoted to religious institutions. As an economist and philosopher, Smith emphasized the positive effects of competition among religious institutions and stood against the alliance of religion with the state. Competition, in his view, has many functions. Looking from the political point of view, it is a force capable of contributing to social order. For religious institutions competition invigorates their activity towards ensuring survival. Believers, or consumers, on the other hand, gain more freedom of choice.[1] Nowadays, researchers, both sociologists and economists, continue this idea of applying economics to exploration of religious activity and build their models using specific concepts and tools of modern economic theory. This approach assumes that people do not change the basic principles guiding their behavior when changing settings from "profane" to "sacred." The same rules apply to workplace or business as to church. Religion and its impact on society is regarded as too crucial to simply be excluded from academic research. This paradigm is possible due to the redefinition of the scope of economics. Earlier, this discipline was concerned mainly with wealth and money. Contemporary horizons of economists are much wider and focus on utility, or satisfaction also in many "non-market" areas of social life (Ekelund, Hébert, Tollison, 2006, p. 5). In his Nobel lecture on November 1992, Gary S. Becker (1992) argued for extending the economic approach to analyze numerous social issues, which until then had not been regarded as the domain of economists. This vision inspired many scholars, including sociologists and economists of religion. The academic encounter between economics and religion does not cause so many surprises as in the past.

1 Robert B. Ekelund, Robert F. Hébert, Robert D. Tollison (2006) offer a comprehensive review of Adam Smith's contribution to the economics of religion in chapter 2 of "The Marketplace of Christianity".

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The goal of this chapter is to discuss the topic of religious pluralism and basic theoretical propositions of the religious economies approach that provides the theoretical background for this book. The first sections discuss the concept of religious pluralism which is a necessary, although insufficient, condition of competition and its relation to religiosity. It is one of the key topics in the contemporary sociology of religion responding to the urgent need to better understand the fast changing religious landscape in the world and, in particular, local contexts. The prevailing definitions of pluralism do not simply relate to the situation of coexistence of many religions or forms of religions. Pluralism which is interesting for researchers is the complex and dynamic system of social interactions between religious actors. There are interactions of various kinds, such as an ecumenical dialogue or a collaboration in a humanitarian crisis. For analyzing changes in the religious realms, however, it is important to pay attention to the process of competition among religious actors as well as to the context in which competition takes place. When we define pluralism in such a wide sense then it exhibits many similarities to the market approach and both can be linked together in looking for understanding of the contemporary religious revival in Islam.

The review of a variety of changes triggered by the diversification of religious spheres will follow. The global environment is increasingly competitive, and migrations, travels, mass media and internet show other belief systems. Religions, in order to survive, cannot ignore this fact and continue their traditional activities in an unchanged way. The forces of the religious market have an impact on both sides of the interactions—religious institutions (firms) and believers (customers). After presenting the influence of religious pluralism, I will discuss the religious market hypothesis proposing a causal relationship between pluralism and religious activity. The idea that religious engagement is not static but can depend on various external factors, including the level of pluralism and activism of religious actors, raises controversies and questions. The issue whether a higher number of religious firms and entrepreneurs, using the language of the economics of religion, and their struggle for believers impact the level of religiosity has till now not been settled. It thus remains an open question for further investigations. Another part of this chapter will be devoted to the role of competition and regulation—chief factors identified in the model as linking the levels of pluralism with the levels of religious activity.

As discussions around this proposition show, there is a need to widen the scope of research on religious pluralism. The mechanisms postulated by the theory should be better understood, not only assumed. One possible way, that has directed my study as well, is to abandon the causal relationships postulated by the theory and search for other possibilities. The anthropological perspective

which I applied in the research meant giving voice to the actors themselves. To understand the impact of the unprecedented religious pluralism I was asking people questions about how they perceive the situation. I conducted interviews with both sides of the market—religious "entrepreneurs" who are trying to attract people to their communities, mosques or movements, and with people looking for a suitable Islamic branch and searching for a religious leader they could trust. I observed meetings with religious topics and visiting mosques to see what attracts people to each form of Islamic religion and why. During interviews I asked people about their individual way to religion, when and in which circumstances they became attracted to religious ideas. Anthropological methods, although being non-representative, were useful in gaining more understanding of how competition in a plural religious landscape works.

So far, most studies in the economics of religion relied on quantitative data and applied to the United States and some other Western states. This is understandable as the researchers who began exploring this topic asked questions relevant to the reality they experienced living and working in these countries. If, however, the theory has universal ambitions and aims at constructing general laws of human behavior, it should encompass data from other political, economic and socio-cultural contexts. It is a challenging task, because American data on religion are more detailed than elsewhere and were systematically collected for a longer time. They are obviously not perfect; the U.S. government does not survey all the aspects of religion interesting to scholars, and religious institutions frequently use the data in their PR activities, for example keeping inclusive records of believers (e. g., the Church listing all baptized people as its members even if some of them never attend a mass or pray). Besides, religious behavior is observable only to some extent. Measuring beliefs, values, morality or symbolic imagery poses numerous challenges. It is hard to evaluate the accuracy of respondents' answers to questions on their personal beliefs and attitudes. Nonetheless, in the U.S. context researchers can find more data on the history and present situation of religious market than other parts of the world. There is a long history of social surveys covering religious issues. Although several research institutions organize surveys also in the non-Western states, the data are less abundant and less detailed than in the U.S (Iannaccone, 1998, p. 1467–1468). The post-Soviet states, for example, have had a complicated history in regard to state-religion relations and the official data lack reliability. Religion was, to various degrees, an enemy to the state, and religious ideas were considered to be a threat to socialist ideology. Religions which survived were either collaborating with the state or went underground and access to them was limited for researchers.

Applying the market model to the Islamic religion in the post-Soviet context is challenging and creates many problems. The economics of religion was mostly developed to deal with institutional forms of the Christian religion. This aspect is one of the main differences in dealing with Islam from the point of view of researchers. Contrary to Catholic Christians, Muslims do not have a Pope, or a formally recognized hierarchy of priests with parishes extending all over the world. The institutional character of Islam is different. Religious rites can be private and do not require any intermediary, although this may happen. There is no direct equivalent to the church, or "religious firm" in Islam. There is no central institution in the Muslim world which has the right to excommunicate other groups or define what is proper in Islam. Therefore, there is a need to better conceptualize what "Islamic market" means and who are the players. Many communities or movements operate independently and the forms of organization differ, making it more difficult for comparisons than in the case of Christianity. In order to better conceptualize the Islamic market I have taken inspirations from Pierre Bourdieu (1991), whose ideas related to the topic of religious revival I present in the final section of this chapter. The concepts developed by the French sociologist in his analyses of a religious field seem to be a fruitful tool to complement the theory of the economics of religion. Bourdieu's concept of a "field" shares many common characteristics with the market approach, but it is a wider term and I believe it better suits the situation of Islam. The religious field is an arena of interactions, including competition, between various kinds of participants and players, not only churches. This concept is more flexible and makes it easier to analyze the transactions and interactions between the faithful and religious actors offering goods and services. Bourdieu's writings also point to the need to explore deeply two internal elements of competition—"capital" and "strategy". This focus on the struggle for capital and the unequal access to it, as well as on the strategy which every player on the market must choose in a, more or less conscious, process can be a fruitful extension to the market model. It is also a convenient tool for qualitative research helping to formulate adequate questions to believers and religious entrepreneurs. All these reflections do not try to undermine the economics of religion as a research model. It is a paradigm that has many successes in explaining the evolution of religion as well as the behaviors of people and organizations on the religious market. But it can be further expanded, with the help of Bourdieu's concepts, by taking into consideration the differences in religions in the world, especially outside the Judeo-Christian world.

Another suggestion for improving the market model of religion is to test the theory in non-Western contexts, which have largely been neglected in scientific explorations. Such tests require that the concepts and their operationalization

are suitable for non-Christian and non-Western societies, in the case of this study, for a Muslim country. Responding to these challenges, I propose to understand pluralism not only as a multitude of religious groups or "firms," but much wider, as a set of options consisting of "discursive traditions," which is a term employed in the anthropology of Islam. Representatives of various traditions constantly influence and challenge each other, thus prompting change in the belief system, ideology, organization, goods or services provided by them.

1.1 Studying Religious Pluralism

Two interesting shifts have taken place in the recent scholarship on religion. Firstly, this subject has returned from the marginal position it occupied in sociology since around the 1950s to the mainstream field of social research. For decades students had been discouraged from studying religious problems. "Why invest in studying something that was destined to wither and die," mentors advised (Smith, 2008, p. 1561). A bulk of books and articles on religion has recently been published by prestigious scientific companies. Numerous enterprises attempting to understand the vast and complex area of religious phenomena are noticeable. This unexpected change is related to a general trend in social sciences of religion to widen the scope of research by increasing the extent of observations from non-Western religious traditions and cultures (see Zielińska, 2009). World events and religious movements since the mid-1970s, indicating an increasing vitality of religion around the globe, have gradually attracted scientists' attention. The cold war finished and religion became a factor in ethnic conflicts and wars. Rising nationalisms included religion in their agendas. At the same time, we are currently observing the revival of evangelical Christianity, the global spread of Protestant movements and a growing popularity of transnational Islamic networks, such as the Salafists. In that process of religious ferment on nearly all continents, new stimuli to theoretical developments have appeared, resulting in turbulent discussions in social sciences.

Secondly, the issue of religious pluralism emerged in the centre of the debate on religion. Obviously, the phenomenon of pluralism existed in the past, to mention some examples, such as the Silk Road, multi-ethnic and multi-religious Andalusia ruled by Muslims, or toleration of religious dissidents in Poland-Lithuania. The Tatar population living in Poland for several centuries managed to keep their attachment to Islam, although the architecture of their mosques resembles that of Catholic churches. The process of exchanges and interactions between Catholic Poles and Muslim Polish Tatars resulted in striking similarities in many ideas on religion and its practice (Wiktor-Mach, 2008). Each of the

world religions has its own local characteristics with elements of ethnicity, nationality, and culture influencing the overall content and form of religion. Religious traditions adjust and reveal a colorful diversity of customs, beliefs, and convictions. At the same time, research on contemporary modern religious pluralism have been dealing almost exclusively with the American situation. It was only with the sudden "globalization of pluralism" (Berger, 2006), that the problem emerged as a hot topic in the scientific study of religious behavior. At present, neither is the American religiosity studied as a "deviant case," nor are scholars pursuing the thesis of "American exceptionalism" (Tiryakian, 1993). Social scientists analysing all aspects of pluralism and diversity in religion aspire to create theoretical propositions that could apply to non-American contexts as well.

Research on religious pluralism and conflict are an alternative to the influential functionalist paradigm in social sciences, which assumes an integrative role of religion in society. Far from Durkheim's interpretations, studies of religious groups in a pluralistic society do not focus on common values or social bonds between people belonging to different social strata. Instead, they analyse religious figures as agents of conflict between groups and nations.

Some of the puzzles in contemporary debates on religious pluralism concern the questions: What is the impact of religious pluralism? Does the lack of a religious monopoly influence peoples' faith? Does it induce religious organizations to change their way of doing? How does pluralism reshape the religious map? Or, more precisely, what is the relationship between religious pluralism and religious vitality? Does religious pluralism decrease religious participation or increase it? What are the mechanisms behind this relation? As we will see further in this chapter, the answers found in the literature are far from being conclusive.

The Concept of Pluralism

Pluralism is a concept used in different branches of humanities and social sciences, such as philosophy, ethics, political studies or sociology. It is thus inevitably understood in a variety of ways and thus has to be clarified. Which meaning of the term pluralism will be suitable for exploring the religious resurgence? If by pluralism we understood simply a coexistence of diverse religious orthodoxies and orthopraxies under the condition of at least a minimum level of tolerance and freedom of acting ("civic peace" (Berger, 2006)), then such definition would be too wide for the aim of this study. It will not be a useful tool for studying the situation in the post-Soviet religious sphere. We should widen the scope of the term to include not only the existence of diverse religious expressions but also

some level of social interactions between representatives of various religions or branches of religion. Pluralism, therefore, is not diversity. It describes the field of engagements between religions. If we excluded an element of interactions, then pluralism would also refer to different forms of ghettos, isolation, or the caste system. It is imaginable that in such circumstances other religions do not constitute real options for the majority of believers who keep attachment to their religious tradition.

In scientific literature there are also other approaches to the concept of religious pluralism. Quite often it is defined in a purely institutional way (Jagodzinski, 1995); the number of churches or other sacred places, organized communities, sects, cults, or religious movements is taken as an indication of the level of religious pluralism. Researchers examining Muslim communities in the West underline an increase in the range of mosques, Muslim organizations, cultural centres, foundations, associations, with many such institutions acting in practice also as mosques. In this case it is possible to compare the level of pluralism on the state, regional or other levels of analysis. Although this approach is applicable to American or European contexts, it creates problems outside the Western world. Islamic religion is, to a larger degree than Christianity, based upon a direct relationship between people and the Creator. Although a lot of ritualistic life in Islam takes place publicly (e. g., hajj, prayer in mosques, pilgrimages), there is also a tendency to celebrate religion either privately, in the family circle or in informal groupings, which are not registered anywhere nor do they appear in statistics. There is no Islamic equivalent to the Catholic parish system of organization. Further, fundamentalist militant groupings will be unwilling to share true information on the numbers of their communities or members. The number of sacred places in Central Asia and Caucasus that are visited by believers of different faiths will not indicate the real level of pluralism. Finally, at least in Azerbaijan, participation of people in religious movements or an affiliation with a particular tradition does not require believers to attend mosques or other sacred places. Especially among young people links with a religious branch are upheld through the Internet, where people seek the advice of scholars, look for specific information, take part in discussion groups, or join on-line religious communities. Religious lifestyles begin to follow completely new patterns. The emergence of a network society poses new challenges to researchers.

These examples make us aware of the difficulties related to a purely institutional conceptualization of religious pluralism that can easily be quantified and employed in statistical research. Another intuitive understanding of pluralism is the diversity of religions in a given society. The number of religions would then indicate the level of pluralism. However, in many cases, the differences between distinct traditions inside Judaism, Hinduism or Islam are too huge to be neglect-

ed. It is probably the most important lesson from social research on Jews and Christians that inner divisions matter a lot. Orthodox Jews differ in many aspects from the Reform or Conservative Jews beginning with the approach to the Torah. In Orthodox Judaism, the Torah comes directly from God, in the Reformist branch it is believed that God has only "inspired" people to write the Book. This division is clearly observable in everyday life, from gender issues to the degree of strictness in observing the Sabbath. The problem of inner-religious diversity lies in differences in theology, worship, and lifestyle inspired by religion, or in attitudes to modernity. Adherence to a particular movement has crucial cultural, social and political implications (Woodberry, Smith, 1998). It often has impact on the family structure as well as on shared norms and values. Some branches may emphasize the need to be an active member of a society, to do volunteering, to devote one's time and energy to some public goods. Other religious traditions stress the importance of meditation and distance to the outside world. That is the main reason why in researching religions an anthropological sensitivity to inner differences and seemingly unimportant details is key in proper analysis of religion and religious impact on the society.

The Concept of Religiosity

In summation, the term pluralism in this book will refer to the variety of religious traditions, more specifically to Islamic traditions operating inside the same field, or, in the language of the economics of religion, on the same market. The other concept that has to be mentioned in this context is religion—concept, which can be understood in a number of ways. In thinking about this term and its various meanings, I prefer to follow Max Weber's suggestion included in his "Sociology of Religion":

> It is not possible to define religion, to say what it "is," at the start of a presentation such as this. Definitions can be attempted, if at all, only at the conclusion of the study. The "essence" of religion is not even our concern, as we make it our task to study the conditions and effects of a particular type of social action (1963, A.1.a).

In every world religion, including Islam, we can distinguish separate traditions with their particular set of ideas, interpretations, institutions, leaders, followers, reformers and contesters. Each tradition emerges in a certain political context and is shaped by developments in the secular world. If we want to understand the social world of religions, an exclusively theoretical discussion on basic characteristics or the "nature" of religion will not lead us to any fruitful conclusions.

For questions on religious revival, the impact of pluralism, and religious change, the most useful approach will be to understand the concept of religion from an anthropological perspective, i.e., with a focus on various understandings that emerge in Muslim societies or communities and on the choices people make on the religious market. It is the human perspective that matters—how people understand religion in a given context and what kind of activities they undertake in relation to the religious sphere.

Apart from the discussion on religion, it is useful to include the concept of religiosity, which points to the degree and characteristics of religious commitment. A simple denominational description (e.g., "Muslim," "Buddhist," "Catholic") will not indicate religious engagement. The world religions while having 'core' pillars and sacred texts are adapted, to a various degree, to local cultures. More information can be obtained from knowing a person's belonging to a particular tradition, but still the level and the meaning of one's religious commitment inside religious branches change from time to time. Religious movements and their leaders often redefine the model of Islam and change an emphasis from one aspect of religion to another. In such a process, the meaning of a "religious person" will differ. Followers of Sufism, for example, in some periods were encouraged to follow a mystical path with its precise requirements taught by mentors, in other—to engage in the study of Islamic scriptures and law. And in other periods of history, or in different places, a religious Sufi meant someone ready to give his life in the name of God, as it was during Imam Shamil's rule in the 19th-century Caucasus. Sufism then became associated with armed struggle. Therefore, it seems necessary to identify styles of religiosity typical of a particular Islamic group in a given place and time.

The main flaw of sociological statistical research on religion in Azerbaijan is rooted in an ignorance of various aspects of religiosity. The majority of research include questions about self-identification (often with a limited set of options) and religious practice. It is assumed that being a "Muslim," a "Jew" or a "Christian" is a fixed and static social identity. Consequently, phenomena such as the "privatization" or "domestiation" of religion, and women's religious engagement (Dragadze, 1993) are often ignored by scientists. Moreover, these studies do not reveal styles of religiosity, which can vary among distinct Islamic traditions in one society. In order to be able to assess the impact of religion on society, the starting point shall be an understanding of the local meanings of the term "religious person." In many statistical projects multidimensional models of religiosity, which have been developed since the 1960s, contain a set of indicators intended to measure the state and condition of religiosity in society (Swatos,

1999).[2] In my field research, I have not used any particular model of religiosity, but treated it as a multi-dimensional concept. In gathering empirical data, I tried to always be aware of the need to pay attention to various aspects of religious expressions, such as religious behavior (practices, rituals, attitudes towards religious requirements) and religious awareness (religious knowledge, ideas, symbols and their understandings). All those elements create a larger and more nuanced picture of religion and its impact on society.

The Impact of Pluralism

> Contemporary pluralism means that far more religious worldviews are in immediate competition with each other than has ever been the case in the past (Swatos, Christiano, 1999, p. 221).

The above quotation, referring to the theoretical propositions of Stark and Bainbridge, underlines the basic feature of contemporary pluralism. Religions and religious traditions find themselves in a more competing global environment than ever. The scope of religious pluralism is without precedence. Today not only a cosmopolitan urban educated person, but also someone living in a remote religiously homogeneous village, is faced with challenges of "otherness."

In some cases, an encounter with an alternative religious worldview is indirect; public debates in mass media on the threat other faiths allegedly bring raise the public awareness of pluralism. Islamophobia, in the era of migrant and refugee crisis in some European countries, exists to a large extent due to media coverage and radical discourses. Many people who have never met a Muslim person have deep prejudices against Islam. The discourses presented in media on the radicalization of Muslims, on jihadi groups and suicide bombers, as well as on the extreme cases of implementing the Sharia have direct influence on popular attitudes towards the Islamic religion. Similarly, Anti-Semitism can appear in societies which do not have Jewish communities. As Introvigne has argued, "perceived pluralism is at least as important as real pluralism" (2005, p. 2). In Italy a dramatic rise in Muslim immigration in the 1980s and 1990s, accompanied by news about radical Islamism, triggered a lot of discussion on pluralism. Although the majority of Italian citizens are Catholics, the "theoretical" or "per-

2 One of the first influential complex conceptualisations of religiosity, proposed by Glock and Stark (1968) in a book "American Piety" (Mauss, 1998), made it possible to apply the term "religiosity" not only to an institutionalised sphere but also to other dimensions, such as belief, knowledge, experience, practice, and consequences.

ceived" pluralism, as the researchers hypothesize, can account for the growth in religious attendance.

The unprecedented coexistence or clash of religious interpretations leads us to the question that inspired this study: What does the situation of pluralism change in the religious field? This issue raises the next questions on the mechanism of competition. Before we move to our major hypothesis, which originated in the field of market approach, let us review some other inspiring propositions concerning the impact of pluralism on religion that have also been tested on the basis of field work in Azerbaijan.

First of all, when one dominant religious system is challenged by alternative (religious or secular) worldviews, the problem of plausibility (believability) emerges. It is focused around the question of why and in what way people view their beliefs, practices and rituals as true. More specifically, how can they uphold such convictions under the situation of a multitude of other allegedly "real" or "true" religious or non-religious traditions. In the past, religious beliefs belonged to wider cultural systems, and people took for granted their ideas about the spiritual sphere, and rarely questioned the prevailing ideology. Nowadays, a wide array of cults, denominations, and movements propose religious worldviews with their own distinct truth claims. The more varied ideologies there are, the less plausible each seems. Secular ideologies provide new explanations which can undermine or are in opposition to the truth of the "church." In the past, and still at present in many parts of the world, competing worldviews were eliminated, for example in military struggles or actions. During the Middle Ages the institution of Inquisition was used by the Catholic church to combat heresies. In some cases, as in Hinduism, some elements of competing definitions and explanations were absorbed by dominant religions (Berger, 1967).

Pluralism affects both religious organizations and believers. Religions compete and evolve. When the state is not sponsoring or protecting any particular religion, it must act according to market rules. Religious doctrines, services, ideas, symbols and other elements change to meet the requirements of believers and to keep attractiveness. For the institutional actors, pluralism means a more challenging environment in which they have to find effective strategies to survive and flourish. As Peter L. Berger (1967) has argued, religious institutions can respond in one of two ways: either adapt themselves to new requirements or reject the pluralistic situation. Adaptation can be realized on at least two paths. The first is through reduction of the ideological content and is expressed in the secularization of religious tradition. The second path leads through more constructive steps and results in discovering new ideas and meanings in the richness of religious sources and tradition. Rejecting pluralism, which is another type of

strategy, implies choosing a defensive position. In theological concepts this kind of response is typical of neo-orthodox religious trends (*ibidem*). There is also a middle way; religious firms can at the same time emphasize the need for isolation and pragmatically accept some of the new conditions.

All these patterns of action can be observed in Azerbaijan, where Islamic branches are currently developing their modes of responding to the "threat" of diversity. There are a couple of distinguishable influential religious trends in the present religious market. One is neoorthodox Salafism, which adapts a position of exclusivism and draws strict symbolic boundaries inside Islam. A distinct secularized tradition encompasses weak religious requirements and an emphasis on morality. Secularized Muslims' religious identity is mixed with cultural and national features in unique ways. Moreover, there is a vigorous modernist-reformist branch of Islam in Azerbaijan which is represented, among others, by the "Juma community" led by charismatic cleric and oppositionist Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, and there is also a group of Muslim intellectuals spreading their own interpretations of religion. Each of those groups represents one of the above-mentioned strategies of dealing with pluralism.

Religious pluralism, in the aforementioned sense as a field of interactions and competition, also has an impact on the faithful. Among the main challenges for them are the problems of plausibility and choice. Faced with alternative truths, a modern person must be ready to make a decision in regard to religion and to find a proper legitimization of his own beliefs. Thus, the basic change for people is from the experience of fate to choice. Choices can be orthodox, liberal, fundamentalist, but they need justification—it's no longer only tradition that can legitimize one's religious affiliation. It is usually assumed that the faithful look for such religious options which can assure convincing plausible explanations. In such a process, a "universalization of heresy" emerges as a crucial contemporary cultural phenomenon. Even keeping attachment to one's tradition means an act of choice, as Schleiermacher argued (Berger, 1979). This idea that nowadays a person is faced with a constant possibility of choice regarding the religious sphere is also assumed by the religious economies theory. It must be noted that the argument of free choice is rather limited in empirical reality. Whereas in modern, pluralistic, socially mobile societies (exemplified by the United States) the act of choosing and changing one's religious affiliation has relatively few limits, in authoritarian regimes it is otherwise. The case of Azerbaijan, as an example of a country balancing between democracy and authoritarianism, is therefore an interesting test for discovering the limits of choice in a changing political climate.

Another effect of pluralism is a phenomenon of "bricolage." A number of sociologists have noticed some unconventional practices that lead to changes in

existing religious traditions. "Religion à la carte," or "bricolage" (meaning tinkering),[3] as the phenomenon has been labelled, refers to an observation that people not always choose a "complete" religious tradition (as it is transmitted by a class of "religious professionals") but tend to select ritual, ideological, and ethical options from various religions or religious branches according to their preferences. "It's like a Lego, you create your own little version of whatever it is" (Berger, 2006). In post-Soviet Azerbaijani context this phenomenon entails a mix of Islamic, Christian, Zoroastrian ideas with folk-religious customs, magic and superstitions. This process of a creative act of transformation of religious traditions is, in my opinion, to a large degree unconscious. People whose system of religious beliefs evidently derives from many sources do count themselves as Muslims. Therefore, it is questionable whether all forms of bricolage, such as the one in the Azerbaijani version, can be interpreted as reflecting rational or voluntary choice.

Pluralism also affects religious authority and influences its evolution or transformation. In an environment where religions operate on a free market, religious professionals (meaning those for whom religion is not only a way of life but also a job) are faced with fierce competition. The lack of monopoly changes the way authority is legitimized in a society and redefines features and actions or strategies which are most effective in gaining resources and support. In Islam, this problem is further complicated by the fact that, on one hand, "religious experts" do not have such official status as the clergy in Christianity. In many Muslim communities imams perform rituals and lead prayers without any formal qualifications. They are chosen from the group as more knowledgeable than others in the tough science of religion. Diplomas of famous Islamic madrasas or universities add prestige, and fluency in Arabic is a great merit in non-Arab societies. Iran as a theocratic state with Shiite branch of Islam is still another case. Religious scholars ensured themselves an official position through an alliance with the state power and continue to exert influence on state policies. All in all, the criteria for choosing Islamic leaders generally vary from place to place, and this is one of the main feature differentiating this religion from organized institutional religions, such as Orthodox or Catholic Christianity.

So far we have mostly discussed a sociological approach to the dynamics of religion. The emergence of pluralism in the religious sphere is one of the core point of debate in the sociology of religion. The issue of pluralism and its impact on religious situation has also got to the centre of scientific attention in the wave

3 The term was first used by Claude Lévi-Strauss and then employed in the sociology of religion by Thomas Luckmann (Dobbelaere, 1998) and Danièle Hervieu-Léger.

of research focused around the "new paradigm," usually labelled "rational choice," "supply-side," or "religious economies" theory of religion. It has emerged as one of the most serious alternative to secularization theories, although a closer look at both strands of sociological thinking reveals not only differences but also some similarities, especially in recent reinterpretations of the phenomenon of secularization.[4] Nevertheless, the market approach has yielded some inspiring theoretical hypotheses that led to vivid debates among researchers of religion in the last decade. It seems that there can be fruitful discussion on merging ideas from both approaches, the one with more sociological focus and the other from the economic side. In what follows, I will shortly discuss some points for and against the new but influential perspective. I do not intend to summarize the whole approach, as it has already been done many times in the academic literature.[5] The focus of the review will be on certain parts of the theory and on the hypotheses that are directly related to the study of religious revival in Azerbaijan.

1.2 Theoretical Propositions about Religious Economies

The concepts employed in the theory are supposed to parallel economic models of the market, which have proven their usefulness in numerous problems in economics. The basic assumption of the supply-side model of religion is that "religious economies are like commercial economies" (Finke, Stark, 1988, p. 42). The analogy to mechanisms functioning in the market economy can be found even before the market theory of religion crystallized. A few decades ago, still before the advent of globalization, Berger (1967, p. 193 – 195) in his classic "Sacred Canopy" has claimed that religions in the pluralistic global world are no longer taken for granted by believers, but rather seen as products in a free market economy. Those wares need to be advertised and sold, which can take place only if wishes or preferences of clients will be taken into account. Even though people's choices in cultural and religious spheres are not unlimited (traditional ties or other social constrains maintain their power), they nevertheless force religious suppliers to strive for clients.

4 For a discussion on the secularization paradigm and its inner differences, see Zielińska (2009) or Bruce (2011).

5 An overview of the history, the main arguments and propositions of the market paradigm or the economics of religion is presented in (Iannaccone, 1998; Sacred Markets, 2002; Ekelund et al., 1996; Ekelund, Hébert, Tollison, 2006; Ekelund Jr., Tollison, 2011).

A lot of theoretical propositions of the market approach focus on the "supply side," or more precisely, on the changing practices of religious "firms" rather than on the demand side, or behavior of religious "consumers" (Stark, Iannaccone, 1994, p. 232). It is argued that the demand for religion maintains a relatively constant level. Changes in religious observable engagement which have taken place in history many times can be explained by the supply-side factors. Those consist of a number of entrepreneurial actors and institutions—religious firms—that act as suppliers of religious goods and services. The low level of engagement in religious practice is caused not by a weak demand for religion but by either unattractive or badly advertised products and services or by the lack of a "preferred brand of religious activity" (Finke, Stark, 1994, p. 4). On the other hand, vigorous activism of clergy and their successes in marketing can explain rapid growth of some religious branches. For instance, the popularity of two denominations Methodist and Baptist, in the XIX century in the U.S., Finke and Stark (*ibidem*) attribute to their strategies of competition in the market. The same reason, changes in the religious firms' behavior, account for the later failures of the former sect, and the continued success of the latter. This way of reasoning can lead us to the reconsideration of the common interpretation of religious history worldwide.

Other studies underline the importance of the "demand side." The assumption is that there is a certain level of demand for religion, arising from the common desire among human beings to overcome existential fears and to be able to cope with death and existential questions. In many religions theology includes ideas on the afterlife. What those religions, for example Christianity, offer then, is the "assurance of eternal salvation" (Ekelund, Hébert, Tollison, 2006, p. 49). It is not the only thing supplied by religious organizations, but it is the one distinguishing religious business from secular one. This idea of guaranteeing afterlife is guiding churches' services and influences their organizational structure. Assurance can't be verified in this life, so affiliation with a particular religious branch relies partially on trust (apart from other constraints, such as social networks, family and peer pressure, ethnic or national identity, etc.). What this theory highlights for better understanding of religious change, such as religious revival, is that the level of demand is not constant. The demand for the religious core product is dependent upon many factors, such as income, risk profile, satisfaction one gets from the service, the price for alternatives, and the full price, meaning in this context mostly the money and time devoted to religious participation (Ekelund Jr., Tollison, 2011, p. 20). Any drastic social change, revolution, transformation, war or conflict will accordingly result in changes in demand for religion. Medieval Europe with the experience of Black Death, constant wars and difficult conditions for a huge part of societies led people towards the church

which was offering protection and security (*ibidem*, p. 59). In the chapter "The Lived Islam" I will point to the problems of transformation of the post-Soviet states and societies. The collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialists Republics (USSR), which lasted almost seventy years, had a profound impact on the lives of people. In December 1991, quite unexpectedly the empire ceased to exist. Fifteen states had to form their political systems and economies, which was a serious task as there were no perfect models to emulate. Single-party rule was replaced with various types of multi-party political systems, and centrally-planned socialist economies gave way to emerging capitalism. The region, including Azerbaijan, was in turmoil and the feeling of uncertainty among people was commonplace, therefore increasing the level of demand for religion.

As Ekelund and his collaborators underline (Ekelund, Hébert, Tollison, 2006, p. 55–58), the demand can be analysed as a demand for a particular form of religion. This is an interesting issue—the evolution of religion is not only a function of supply but also of demand. Demand can be for more or less costly forms of religion, or for strict or liberal versions. Historical evidence, according to the researchers, support the idea that "people exhibit a demand for religion and that churches respond by supplying religious services." (Ekelund, Hébert, Tollison, 2006, p. 58). In primitive societies when the survival conditions were tough and science was not developed there was a preference for religious practices involving long, time-consuming rituals and more rigid behaviors resembling cults (*ibidem*, p. 59). There is a need to pay attention not only to what religious organizations propose to believers, but also to what people need and desire in a given time and place, in a very specific economic, political and cultural context. It is crucial whether they can invest more time or other resources in religious practices. The second side of the model seems to be equally important. In the post-Soviet states a lot of changes have been taking place. The socialist system, in spite of its fundamental faults, ensured social security and benefits necessary for living. After the collapse of the system, in the tough process of transformation, unemployment became a serious problem; regional conflicts intensified and people did not feel safe anymore. This may also be a part of the explanation of religious choices people make in an unstable environment. Uncertainty surrounding everyday life may account for strict religious branches which offer social support and strong networks and communities. Poverty, lack of social order, insecurity as well as weak development of education and science tend to change demand for more strict religious branches. There was, taking this perspective, a high level of demand for those forms of religions which were guiding people in a precise way and acting as a moral and ideological compass. There was and still is a lot of hope in charismatic and strong leaders who have a clear vision on how the worldly order should look. This argument can

help us better grasp the rise of Salafi Islam and its popularity in the post-Soviet region since the 1990s. The demand factor is important, but the power struggle inside the religious field is crucial as well. Many powerful processes, for instance decolonization or globalization, have undermined the traditional authority in Islam. Salafists emerged as key players in the transnational Islamic market and refined its position and its form of religion as a result of interaction with other Islamic branches. The competition continuously encourages religious groups to transform themselves and adapt to the needs of time and place.

Let us pose the very basic question: What is a religious economy? The basic definition within the framework of the theory is as follows: It is "the social arena where religious firms compete for members and resources" (Gill, 2002, p. 119). Religious marketplace is seen as reflecting a structure and function of a "general market":

> Religious economies are like commercial economies in that they consist of a market of current and potential customers, a set of firms seeking to serve that market, and the religious "product lines" offered by the various firms (Stark, Iannaccone, 1994, p. 232).

A religious marketplace is only possible when a number of suppliers are active, and when they are interested in providing services to customers. Generally, there are two kinds of "product lines": one of a religious and second of a non-religious nature. They involve theological doctrines, identifiable symbols, social help services, opportunities for educational or professional development, or entertainment activities. Some of these product lines are used as an element of promotion or as a response to the needs of potential clients. More formal economic theory looks for a precise definition of the notion "product". Unlike in business, religious product is ambiguous. What is then the essence of the product? What is the content of religion? What do customers expect in the end to get from religious organizations? Do they expect services or products? And, of what kind? Is the product tangible or intangible? All those and similar questions are still under debate and pose the challenge of applying economic analysis to religion. Most studies do not even attempt at giving a definition of religious product. Ekelund and his team have discussed at great length this problem and present their ideas. They propose to understand the core product offered by religious institutions as a particular kind of information which is unverifiable until death. This feature, unique to religion, implies that religion should be treated as a "credence good" (Ekelund, Hébert, Tollison, 2006, p. 48).

"Religious firms" in the market religion theory are defined as:

> social enterprises whose primary purpose is to create, maintain and supply religion to some set of individuals (Stark, Iannaccone, 1994, p. 232).

This definition clearly points to business-oriented organizations which, apart from their spiritual focus, are engaged in producing and distributing religious products in the market. The aim, as in business, is to ensure maximum profit and sustainability. A firm can function only in relation to potential customers, thus it has to identify its "social niche," a target audience that it aims at appealing to. A religious enterprise, in order to be effective, must be sensible to ethnic, social, economic differences in interests and aspirations in a society. Preferences in religious styles are widely recognized as being affected by social characteristics, such as social class, social mobility, racial or ethnic minority status, socialization by family and peer groups (Bankston, 2002, p. 312). Economic analysis of churches and sects as firms opens ways to new explanations of the development and evolution of religious doctrines, changes in religious practices and the organizational features of religious bodies (Iannaccone, 1998, p. 1484 – 1485).

An ambitious analysis of the church as an economic firm is presented in the books by Ekelund et al. (Ekelund et al., 1996; Ekelund, Hébert, Tollison, 2006). The Roman Catholic Church in the Middle Ages is presented as a quasi-monopolist or "dominant" and bureaucratic company with its regional divisions and the headquarter responsible for strategic planning and finances. Rent-seeking was a crucial element of the church strategy and to succeed in this field it relied upon political and bureaucratic forces. Being a monopolist gave the Church obvious advantages, but it had to remain vigilant to maintain this position. Competition coming from other sects inclined the Church leaders to propose innovations in doctrines. In this way, the authors argue, purgatory was included in the belief system. The Church leaders, faced with a prospect of losing customers, worked towards boosting demand for their chief product, which ultimately are the "assurances of eternal salvation" and "promises of an afterlife." The concept of religious firms leads to new paths in analysing Christianity with its institutional form of organization. This direction of thinking of the Church was pursued further and resulted in a thorough reinterpretation of the Protestant Reformation and the Counter-Reformation (Ekelund, Hébert, Tollison, 2006). These historical events are presented as a break of the Catholic monopoly in the supply of religion in a huge part of Europe by an "entrepreneurial monk." Intense competition which appeared in the religious market led to efficiency gains. New Protestant firms which appeared in the market were supplying religious product at a lower prize, which was appealing to many congregants. Analysing church as an economic entity makes sense and offers new insights: It "enables us to specify or observe a particular market structure, the degree of competition therein,

managerial/organizational behavior, and a resulting pattern of rent distribution" (Ekelund, Hébert, Tollison, 2006, p. 36).

It is so far discussable to what extent can this approach be applied to less institutionalised religions or forms of religion. Ekelund and his team frequently underline that their preoccupation is with organizations and their behavior. Their theory relates directly to organized religion, so potential extension of all its propositions to analysing other religions, such as Islam, may not be an easy task. Some similarities between religions exist nevertheless and also the Islamic world experienced episodes when the Muslim religion enjoyed government favours and religious officials supported the state structures. Such symbiosis of religion and a state can be analysed as a monopoly case when other forms of religions were discriminated against, persecuted or made illegal. Also, the competition process bears similarities in many aspects, although in Islam it is not always between organizations.

Unclear Correlation Between Pluralism and Religiosity

> [R]eligious diversity increases religious mobilization (Finke, Stark, 1989, p. 1054).
>
> It appears that North Americans are religious in spite of, not because of, religious pluralism (Olson, 1998, p. 761).

These two contradictory claims made by the prominent actors in the debate on religion and pluralism reflect the disagreement on the question whether people tend to be more active in a surrounding that offers them choices or not. An economic perspective posits that pluralism is positively associated with participation or level of religiousness. The main proponents of this hypothesis are Laurence R. Iannaccone (1991) and Rodney Stark (1994). Other equally important initiators of the debate are Roger Finke and William Sims Bainbridge (Rational Choice, 1997). The theory of religious mobilization, as the scholars call it, consists of several theoretical hypotheses intended to explain the main processes in religious economies. According to its proponents, the chief thesis that pluralism in the social field of religion does not undermine the vitality religion, as some secularization theorists had argued, is supported by quantitative and historical data. The first publications showing data confirming the positive effects of diversity and competition appeared in the late 1980s (Finke, Stark, 1998). The analysis was conducted on the basis of data for 150 cities in America. Similar conclusions were drawn from many different statistical research. Finke, Guest, and Stark (1996) researched church attendance rates in New York towns in

1855 and 1865 and found that more people attended churches in towns with greater pluralism.

Regulation and Competition as Key Mechanisms

Having clarified our meaning of the very basic terms used in the religious market theory, let us turn attention to the problem posed at the beginning of this section: What kind of mechanisms link pluralism (activity of various religious firms) with the level of religious involvement? The market approach, which argues for a positive relationship between those two variables, points to two main factors affecting the impact of pluralism on religion, namely the regulation of religious economy and competition.

The hypothesis proposing an explanation of the relationship between regulation, competition and religious engagement is as follows:

> To the degree that religious economies are unregulated and competitive, overall levels of religious commitment will be high. (Conversely, lacking competition, the dominant firm [s] will be too inefficient to sustain vigorous marketing efforts, and the results will be a low overall level of religious commitment, with the average person minimizing and delaying payment of religious costs.) (Stark, Finke, 2000, p. 201).

The argument of the market approach says that when religious affiliation is a matter of choice and there are no limitations imposed on religions (such as law restrictions, monopolisation of one religion supported by the state, privileges for some denominations or branches of religion(s)), religious institutions will compete for believers. Competition is perceived as a natural mechanism in the religious field, similarly to its commercial counterpart. The results of competition will be based on the "invisible hand" of the religious marketplace. Religious organizations have a chance for victory only when they are effective enough or, at least, more effective than competitors (Finke, Stark, 1994).

The affirmative impact of competition on religious vitality has been shown, among others, by Stark and McCann (1993). They analysed fluctuations in religious practice among Catholic groups from various regions. It turned out that when the number of Catholics within a district falls, overall Catholic religious activity rises, as the market theory predicts. When a religion does not have a dominant or a stable position on the market it will be exposed to more challenges. Its survival depends then on its capacity to respond to competitors' activities.

The above-stated correlation is explained in this paradigm by suggesting the causal relationship: in a pluralistic environment there is a wider choice for people who have diverse religious needs and preferences (Finke, Iannaccone, 1993;

Finke, Stark, 1994; Iannaccone, 1991; Stark, Bainbridge, 1996). In that way, a greater part of the society can find offers suitable for them. Firms taking part in competition will specialize, as the theory proposes. They will have to cater to various tastes of their target groups. A single religious organization would be unable to incorporate often contradictory ideologies existing in society, e. g., strictness and permissiveness, exclusivism and inclusivism, liberalism and conservatism. Competition also involves a great deal of activity necessary to develop and implement effective strategies to deal in an uncertain and changing environment. Competing strategies vary; they can include a set of religious ideas and beliefs or a diversification of religious practices and experience. To succeed in a pluralistic world, religious leaders must make an effort and transform or promote their religious tradition so that they look more attractive than others. Quite often, such actions involve adjusting some religious products to meet the public's needs or proposing some innovations.

Competition between religious firms leads to several observable changes in the marketplace. One of the main transformation is the rise in a proportion of religiously affiliated population. Moreover, rivalry on the marketplace may lead to changes in the rankings between particular religious traditions. Thus, the popularity of religions depends on the economic laws of supply and demand. This process can to some degree account for successes of some religious traditions, such as the unprecedented worldwide growth of Pentecostalism or Mormonism, which, as Peter Berger (2006) suggests, may be the fastest growing denomination in the world. In Islam, the global success of neo-orthodoxy is especially striking. Islamist movements which identify themselves with Salafism gain popularity and attract new supporters in many Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority countries. Salafism has managed to take a strong position in the Islamic market, in which political, social as well as theological struggles are very dynamic.

The emergence of pluralism in the religious sphere incites "entrepreneurial religious organizations to mobilize resources" (Smith, 2008, p. 1578). If religious firms are not supported by the state, as is the case in ideal market situation, then to get necessary means for survival and development they need to undertake marketing activity. This aspect makes these competitive firms more efficient in comparison to state-supported monopolistic or oligopolistic religious companies (Stark, Iannaccone, 1994). This argument is well illustrated in the study of Protestant Reformation (Ekelund, Hébert, Tollison, 2006).

What happens when the market is controlled by one or two firms supported by the state? Legally privileged institutions do not risk any sanctions for doing a routine job. Their right to an existence and resources are for some time ensured and they do not face any challenge from competitors. There is, therefore, no need

for them to rely on followers for resources. Consequently, religious organizations are not obliged to undertake marketing actions, nor are they forced to spend more on improving their product. They will fail to keep peoples' attachment. The lack of "zeal" in monopolistic church activity has been noticed in social sciences already in the eighteenth century by Adam Smith (1776, after Stark, Iannaccone, 1994, p. 233) who wrote:

> [T]he clergy, reposing themselves upon their benefices, had neglected to keep up with the fervour of faith and devotion of the great body of people; and having given themselves up to indolence, were incapable of making vigorous exertion in defence even of their own establishment.

As the theory further argues, when competition is missing the overall degree of participation in religious practices will tend to be low. The resulting change does not, however mean that the society is secularising, in the sense of a decline of belief and practice. Religious life can operate also underground and people get used to expressing their religious life in an unofficial, alternative way. In regard to empirically observable secularization in many European societies, proponents of the economic market model attempt at explaining it by arguing that it is the weakness on the side of suppliers. It is not a change in demand for religion that is responsible for low church attendance. The high degree of regulation of particular religious economies and low levels of intra- and inter-religious competition have been found as lying behind the "decline of religion" on European continent (Stark, Iannaccone, 1994), which is an interesting explanation of the secularization process. The opposite trend was analysed for the United States. In *The Churching of America* (1994), Finke and Stark presented their surprising findings from the research on religious history in America. The aim was simple—to account for the dramatic rise in church membership over the past two hundred years. The conclusion was straightforward; it was the "free market religious environment that exposed religious organizations to relentless competition" (Finke, Stark, 1994, p. 2). The growth of a market religious economy promoted active, aggressive organizations that turned out to be winners in the struggle and mobilized an impressive number of supporters. Thus, an increase in vigorous religious suppliers was a decisive factor in the rise of American religiousness.

Problems with Market Theory

The popularity of the market approach to religion made it a subject of many critical evaluations. One of the objections of its opponents is the very basic idea that

explicitly economic concepts may relate to such a sphere as religion: How can the mysteries and irrationality of religion be reduced to simple models accounting for economic behavior? How can we assume that rational choice can refer to religious goods?

Whereas these doubts, assuming an extraordinary status of religious sphere might be justified, the fact is that social research on religion does not focus on religion *per se*; conversely—the subject of analysis are actions of human beings. If we assumed that people's behavior varies substantially in different spheres of life, little generalizations about social life could be made. Besides, although "at first glance the regulation of the religious market seems far removed from individual" (Finke, 1990, p. 614), the increasing number of research has shown the usefulness of the predictions implied by the economic perspective. Another argument for employing this concept is that, like in economics, market implies a largely independent sphere, which may be studied separately from other spheres. A lot of research has been conducted on political or environmental impact on the market, but the emphasis in economics is placed on the inner mechanisms and processes that take place largely independently. By analogy, the term "market" suggests that it is a distinct religious field with its structure and inner dynamics that will be a primary subject of research. This approach is a decisive severance from the Marxist reductionist explanations, in which religion is seen as being subordinated to economy. Religious market approach postulates that religious phenomena, such as religious martyrdom (see Iannaccone, 2006), can be understood by analysing the supply and demand factors inside a religious field.

Another aspect of criticism deals with the very basic assumptions of the supply-side theory. Steve Bruce (2011) pays our attention to the problematic nature of religion in comparison to the strictly economic sphere. The first issue is utility, which is considered in the supply-side model to drive human actions in general. If we want to maximize utility we must be able to compare products or services. There are precise criteria to evaluate which goods are best for our needs. Comparing the value of Catholicism versus Sikhism or Protestantism is impossible during our life in this world, as the truth shall be revealed after our death. Further he argues that there is no justification for analysing religious groups as economic enterprises, because religious goods cannot be changed. Religious institutions, having more restrictions, do not resemble secular businesses. Moreover, believers cannot be treated as consumers, since people's choices are often restricted by cultural and social constraints. Being brought up in a given place and in a given time embeds people in social networks. A Muslim in Islamabad or a Buddhist born in Phnom Penh acquire religious affiliation together with ethnic and cultural identities. Changing religious beliefs in many cases leads to ostracism or other, more or less severe, sanctions. There are no comparable prices

in case of switching material goods, such as cars or houses. In more mobile societies, such as the American one, switching religion requires less effort and costs than in strong communities with family, ethnic or tribal bonds. However even in the U.S. the religious market is not as flexible as it seems at the first glance. Race and ethnicity are powerful segregation factors, which is visible in a high percentage of racially homogenous churches. Religion, after all, is not a matter of private independent choice and, in that respect, it differs fundamentally from the economic market and business activity.

Equally serious arguments against the theory stem from works proving the opposite to what the market model predicts. The quotation included at the onset of this section from Daniel Olson's (1998) conclusion to his review of Finke and Stark's results is an exemplary one. On the whole, numerous tests of supply-side model are inconclusive. It is especially surprising, because the empirical data and high level of statistical methodology were supposed to enable a straightforward and definite test for the theory. Variable analysis employed to the problem gave hope to sociologists with positivists inclinations that the basic questions can be dealt with without all this ambiguity that is characteristic of qualitative research. In the end, the work was supposed to present more general laws regarding religion (Smith, 2008). The failure of such expectations, at least for the present moment, was clearly visible when in 2001 a review article was published (Chaves, Gorski, 2001). It assessed the relevant empirical evidence (large-*N* quantitative studies including historical and comparative data) presented by both advocates and critics of the market model. An analysis of 193 of the most crucial empirical works engaged in the debate led to a conclusion that, for the time being, the major hypothesis of the supply-side model can neither be supported nor rejected. The problem still waits for more decisive solutions. For that reason, I would suggest that more attention has to be turned towards qualitative research, which has almost been absent in this subject.

Anthropological perspective can shed new light on competing interactions from the actors' points of view. An investigation into various interpretations and activities of believers and religious leaders may, hopefully, lead researchers to propose additional mechanisms mediating between pluralism and religiousness.

A positive relationship between pluralism and religious activity has been proven mainly in Western settings. It results from the fact that the majority of research in this field has been conducted on the basis of North American and Western European data. According to Chaves and Gorski (*ibidem*), market concepts are problematic in an application to non-modern societies. In my opinion, however, the validity of this claim depends on the understanding of the term "non-modern." If it did not apply to any non-Western world, then it would be easy to

find empirical counterarguments. Religious pluralism is globalising at an increasing rate, and its consequences worldwide are not well-known. Looking through lenses of the globalization paradigm, a serious weakness of the supply-side theory emerges. In the search for universal laws in religious activity, an inappropriate generalization from the American context is made. There is an evident overrepresentation of research on the Western case, which can be partly explained by, first of all, a familiarity of context to Western researchers and, secondly, by the lack of adequate statistical data from other continents. With few exceptions (see e. g. Froese, 2004) there are no influential studies employing the economic model to religion in the post-Soviet area, where the dynamics in religious pluralism and participation are widely acknowledged. This region should be of interest to sociologists also because it experiences dramatic increases in religious life and because, unlike in the United States, post-Soviet governments strongly interfere in the religious market. My project, although limited in scope to one Muslim country, indicates some problems with economic expectations concerning regulation and competition in religion.

What Chaves and Gorski might have suggested, if I understand them in a right way, is the necessity to adapt the economic model to non-American or generally non-Western context. If so, insights form other societies and non-Christian religions should be taken into consideration. As I have found out in my own research, an application of the model to other cultures and religions is not straightforward. Some changes in the conceptualization are therefore necessary. In order to do so, I have found it useful to incorporate in my research some ideas of the anthropology of Islam and of Pierre Bourdieu's research on the dynamics and structure of social fields, including religious one.

Implications for Future Research

The inconclusive findings of research on religious economies theory do not undermine the need for future studies on pluralism. At the moment, scholars are searching for constructive ways to modify the research agenda, so that it could yield more illuminating insights or propose new hypotheses. One proposition is to abandon, for the time being, works intended solely to settling the dispute whether the thesis postulating a positive relationship between religious pluralism and religious vitality is universally true or not. The scope of research should be much wider. In what follows I present three directions, which I have been exploring in this project; they seem to be a good starting point for expanding the model.

First of all, instead of assuming that there is a general law of religious behavior applying to all contexts, which is a very ambitious goal, a more constructive way is to analyse specific cases and to seek to understand causal mechanisms that can influence the relationship between pluralism and religiosity (Smith, 2008). One of the main tasks will be to explain the variations between contexts where there is a positive, negative and null correlation between pluralism and religiousness. The post-Soviet space where religious revival coincides with a sudden diversification of local religious markets and fierce competition offers an interesting test case. In Azerbaijan, in the past twenty years thousands of people began to practice religion and to describe themselves as religious people. Therefore, in my analysis, I will propose the conditions that seem to influence the disputed relationship in the post-communist country, paying special attention to the differences between post-Soviet and North American contexts.

Secondly, as Chaves and Gorski propose (2001), future research shall concentrate on discovering various consequences of a pluralistic situation, not only those postulated by the theory. A good starting point for that, in my opinion, consists in conducting qualitative research that may suggest some mechanisms by which religious diversity impacts religious practices and beliefs. The voices, opinions and perspectives of people (customers) should not be neglected. There is an acute need of more understanding of the social mechanisms taking place in religious markets. Although anthropological methods are limited in scope, they can contribute to the discussion by underlining the local actors' values, norms, ideas and points of view.

Thirdly, another direction for research is the investigation into the regulation hypothesis, which postulates that state intervention in the freedom of the religious market leads to a decrease in the level of religious activity. On the basis of data from post-Soviet states it is necessary to reject an assumption that there is a direct causal relationship between these two variables. Instead, we need to explore other plausible explanations. Similar inconsistency with theoretical predictions have also been discovered in historical research. Some degree of regulation and control does not always prevent religiosity from flourishing. For example, during the Reformation, religious pluralism and the level of religiousness increased, as the arguments stated, but at the same time regulation of the religious market was rising as well, which is inconsistent with the theory. Thus, it is recommended by Chaves and Gorski to drop the market model proposition about the direct one-way causal relationship and look for possible reciprocal causation between the state intervention, pluralism and religious participation.

1.3 Applying Economic Theory to Islam

One of the key problems in applying sociological theories to the study of Islam is the fact that the Muslim religion does not have an institution equivalent to the Christian Church. There is no office similar to the pope and no state such as Vatican. Although in practice a lot of Muslim countries have developed separate groups of religious experts, who often were able to monopolise the production and transmission of Islamic knowledge, in classical Islam the relationship between Allah and believers does not involve any kind of mediators. For that reason, the common operationalization of pluralism in the market model of religious activity—the number of congregations, parishes, or religious groups—is hardly applicable to an Islamic context. While in Christianity a church is a holy space, a mosque has a different status, although it is revered by believers. A majority of Muslims do not affiliate officially with a particular institution that could take part in a market competition. The Islamic religion does not resemble the church with its bureaucratic organization and a system of hierarchy competing with other institutionalised religious firms. Moreover, there is a wide range of institutions for Muslims to attend. A cultural Muslim association can serve both as a cultural centre and as a mosque, without using officially the name "mosque," and without a minaret or other visible religious symbol. This situation happens in many European countries. In the atmosphere of widespread Islamophobia Muslim communities may prefer not to open another mosque, but rather a different form of institution. Muslims all over the world regularly meet in informal study circles, where they read the Koran, hadiths and writings of past and contemporary Islamic theologians. There are numerous discussion meetings over the ideas of the leading intellectuals of the religious revival, such as Hassan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, Abul Ala Maududi. The diversity of the reinterpretations of religion is influencing the scope of practices and discourses. In Europe, the first generations of Muslim immigrants were closely tied to ethnic and tribal communities, but now, among the next generations born and raised in Europe, religious affiliation is more open to choice. Ethnic loyalties are weaker and thus the competition between Islamic communities is more intense (Bendixen, 2013, p. 88 – 89). In Turkey study circles focused around Said Nursi and his commentary to the Koran the *Risale-i Nur*, which are known as the Nurcu groups, exert a lot of influence in public sphere. The discussions of Nursi followers are not solely religious, but revolve around public, political, philosophical or moral topics. The reading circles are powerful institutions forming the religious and social identity outside the formal system of madrasas or mosques. They need to be taken into account if we want to understand the Islamic identities in Turkey (Yavuz, 2003, p. 162 – 170). These very influential forms of associations are not included in most

statistical data on religious attendance, although they are also important actors in the competition inside Islam. The problem of pluralism in Islam must be solved in a different way.

In social research on Islam in Azerbaijan the aspect of pluralism has either been neglected or inadequately operationalized. In my view, a promising way to capture diversity and the interactions inside the Islamic field is by the application of Talal Asad's concept of "discursive traditions." This proposition grew out of a debate in a relatively new subdiscipline—the anthropology of Islam. It emerged as an opposition to a common practice of essentialism in regard to Islamic religion, i.e., a reduction of Islamic culture to few fixed rules and rituals. The breakthrough in the research on Islam came with the first major ethnographic studies of Muslim societies in the 1960s, which favoured the study of religious scriptures and practices as they were understood and discussed in various societies functioning in their own historical, economic, and cultural contexts. An emphasis was put on a "bottom-up" perspective explaining how various types of social actors influence the transformation of Islamic doctrines, practices, ideas. The symbolic moment regarded as a birth of the new field of inquiry into Islamic religion is the publication of Clifford Geertz's book "Islam Observed" in 1968. In the following decades, publications on Muslim lives and Islamic religion in the Middle East, Indonesia, Asia, Africa started to appear.[6] Comparative studies, such as Ernest Gellner's "Muslim Society" (1981) or Michael Gilsenan's "Recognizing Islam" (1982) presented the diversity of interpretations and patterns of worship inside the Islamic umma (Launay, 1992). Theoretical discussion over the main issues, questions, and challenges related to this new anthropological field has been initiated by Abdul Zein (1977). But it was Talal Asad's article (1986) that provoked more intellectual ferment in anthropology.

For this work I have found the concept of "discursive tradition" particularly useful. It was developed by many scholars, including Abdul Zein and philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, but in this thesis I follow Asad's formulation (1986, p. 14):

> [a]n Islamic discursive tradition is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present.

It suggests that the Islamic religion can be studied by social scientists as a diversity of meanings and practices within one religion, but within a certain frame-

6 A recent and concise summary of the development of the anthropology of Islam is presented by Marranci (2008).

work. The emphasis on the term "tradition" points to certain limitations in classifications; not every religious or spiritual belief or practice observed in a Muslim society is Islamic. Nor, according to Asad, can we speak of multiple "Islams," such as "Moroccan Islam" or "Indonesian Islam," as such an approach ignores the fact that, all in all, we are discussing one religion with well-defined doctrinal, ritual and legal requirements. In my view, however, national characteristics of Islam can be justified, as we treat them only as an indication that local specific experience and developments have an impact of the form and content of religion practiced by particular group of people. Therefore, having in mind this ambiguity, I will in some cases refer to those national characteristics speaking about, e. g., Turkish or Iranian Islam.

An important aspect in this debate is the fact that in the mainstream Islam (excluding some radical, exclusivist trends) there is a place for inner diversity. The coexistence of four Sunni and one Shiite schools of law (*maḏhab*) is an evident example. On the other hand, a really fascinating issue is the inner competition over ideas, practices and rituals that can be consistent with Islamic religion.

How to differentiate the Islamic world into particular traditions that might constitute an object of research? This is a question of how we conceptualize diversity within this religion. Scholars interested in Islam in the vast area of Soviet Union and post-Soviet countries, used to employ simplistic, often dichotomous, schemes in their analyses. The most frequent framework used nowadays for capturing the inner divisions among Muslim believers is a scheme consisting of "traditional" and "untraditional" or "fundamentalist" traditions. This distinction replaced an older opposition of "official" and "unofficial" religion (see Saroyan, 1997). Traditional Muslims are usually described as being non-radical, liberal and attached to their customs and cultural norms and values. Much public discussion deals with the question of hijab and the proper dress for Muslims. For many Muslim communities outside the Middle East, the veil is not an obligatory part of women's garment. Old women used to wear a kind of veil, which did not often differ from the veil of Christian women. In some communities it was a habit of married women to cover their heads, and not an obligation of young girls. Traditional Islam is thus an Islamic form of ideas and practices consistent with national or ethnic cultures. It is the way of living Islam to which people were socialised as a part of a wider cultural formation. Fundamentalist tradition is seen as a foreign, aggressive, and dogmatic. It is frequently associated with foreign "Arab" Islam, which undermines local habits, customs, values and norms of social behavior. This division of Muslims into "traditional" and "untraditional" has also a political aspect. Frequently the governments in the Caucasus and Central Asia underline their attachment to the first form of Islam, attacking the

other. "Untraditional" Islam is then equated with Wahhabism, fundamentalism, radicalism and terrorism. With so much ideological engagement, this scheme is not a useful starting point for analysis of the empirical world of Islam. Moreover, it does not reflect the real scope of diversity of Islamic expressions that can be encountered in the region. A better solution is to build categorisations on the basis of divisions that participants in the religious field make themselves and to give voice to actors the local discourses seem to be a better starting point for an analysis of intra-religious competition.

Following this idea, I will refer to the basic trends and movements in Islam that historically contributed to its development in the South Caucasus, namely Sunnism, Shiism, and Sufism in their various shapes. For an analysis of the contemporary Islamic field I follow the distinctions that the Muslims make themselves, what I was experiencing during the field research. Since the beginning of Islamic revival, the main division is between "secular (traditional or ethnic) Muslims" and "pious Muslims." The first term refers to the typical in post-Soviet space form of occasional religious practice connected with some basic beliefs in God and a strong sense of morality, which is not always consistent with the Koranic understandings. In my opinion, if people express particular religious worldviews, manifest them in some rituals, and use Islamic symbols, a researcher should not arbitrarily classify those people as non-believers or non-Muslims. Both Sunni and Shiite traditions include secular and pious trends, which date back to the beginning of the twentieth century.

Parallel tradition, reinforced during Soviet rule, is the "official Islam," represented by a group of mainly Shiite Islamic clergy that has formed an alliance with the allegedly secular state. Pious manifestations of Islam are very diverse; the most significant are: Shiism in the interpretation of Iranian ayatollahs, Sunni Salafi global movement, and Modern Orthodoxy shaped by the Turkish context (including a distinct and quickly growing *nurchular* movement). My attention is directed also at the groups that represent reformist or modernist ideas: the Juma mosque community led by Haji Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, and some Azerbaijani intellectuals and independent Islamic scholars.

Thus, while speaking of plurality and religion in the context of Muslim activities in Azerbaijan, I will understand the religious market as consisting of Islamic traditions, which at the local level have their own distinct features (symbols, doctrines, forms of organization, ritual practices, styles of religiosity, and, what's equally important, their own social networks). Each tradition produces and reproduces reinterpretation of the Koran and the hadiths and distribute them in the market. They respond in various ways to the challenges of modernisation, globalization and new technologies. Traditions will be treated as options offered on the religious market, among which any Muslim can choose.

The next problem that appears in applying the economic theory of religion to Islam is the notion of "religious firms." In the market model these institutions are the agents of competition that are supposed to stimulate religious participation in the society. What can be an equivalent of such enterprises in a Muslim context? I will conceptualize this term as a type of an actor (religious group, organization, religious activist, independent leader) that is actively engaged in production, reproduction or dissemination of, using Asad's terms, one of the Islamic traditions.

Apart from the need to adapt the concept of pluralism to Islamic context, one must also reconsider the factor of regulation of religious economy. The market approach to religion predicts that competition between religions can be effective only when there are no restrictions imposed by the state. The situation of the post-communist Muslim societies is seemingly in contradiction to that thesis. Even though the restrictions on religious activities have been reduced, state authorities still attempt, with more or less intensity and success, to control and regulate the free commerce of religion. The regulations clearly favour some religious brands over others. Despite these limitations the growth in the number of practicing Muslims is widely acknowledged. It suggests that we should rethink the role of control as a factor mediating between pluralism and religiosity.

1.4 Capital and Strategies: Insights from Bourdieu

> The *exchange* relations established between specialists and laypersons on the basis of different interests, and the relations of *competition*, which oppose various specialists to each other inside the religious field, constitute the principle of the dynamic of the religious field and therefore of the transformations of religious ideology (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 17).

Applying the market model to Islamic religion in a post-Soviet context is challenging in many ways. One of the problems lies in the conceptualization of pluralism in Islam, which I have already discussed. In the Islamic market it is not the only state-supported system of mosques that matters. Among the key actors, or entrepreneurs, in contemporary Islam there are many communities, informal study circles, groups gathered around influential leaders. There are transnational movements with their own organizational structures. In what follows, I'm looking for ways to link the market model of religion with the sociology of religion. While the economic research on religion gathers evidence mainly from quantitative data, the sociological and anthropological approach is more open to qualitative explorations.

The market model has a lot of advantages in providing explanation of religious change, but to analyse Islamic revival in post-Soviet Azerbaijan it is useful to take inspiration from Pierre Bourdieu and his theory of practice. Even though his works on religion are limited in scope, they deserve attention for some constructive ideas and helpful "thinking tools" (Rey, 2004) for an exploration of various aspects of human activity. Usually Bourdieu's theory of religion is applied to an exploration of the relationship among religion, class and power (*ibidem*), but it seems to me that his concepts can fruitfully enrich both the economic debate on religion and the anthropology of Islam. I do not inspire here to summarize and discuss all his theory of practice or his theses,[7] but will concentrate solely on those which were especially useful in the research on Islamic diversity.

To analyse religion, Bourdieu employs one of his favourite and central concepts: the "fields" (*les champs*):

> [A] field may be defined as a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (situs) in the structure of the distribution of a species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relations to other positions" (Bourdieu, Wacquant, 1992, p. 97).

The term religious field suggests a similarity to religious market. Both concepts suggest that religion can constitutes a relatively independent object of research for sociologists. They direct researchers' attention not only to a relationship between religious and other spheres of social life, but also to the inner dynamics and processes that are characteristic for that particular area. The main developments in the field and on the market are connected to competition between actors and institutions. Religious field is, however, a wider term, and for that reason I often choose to employ that notion rather than religious market. Thinking of Islam as a religious field with its internal dynamics can help us better understand the complicated religious change involving social movement, communities, groups which are not as institutionalised as in for instance Christianity.

Inspired by the classic Weber's analysis of the relations linking bureaucratic priest, charismatic prophet and sorcerer, Bourdieu was concerned with competitive relations between various types of religious specialists. His model implicitly includes three elements of the economy of religion, as Scott Lash (1993) has noticed (Rey, 2004, p. 333): (1) the supply side, or the actors producing relevant

7 For a more general overview of Bourdieu's writings on religion see, e. g., Dianteill (2003) and Rey (2004).

goods; (2) the symbolic goods (products); (3) the demand side (consumers of those products). However, the concept of field is not limited to competition, but includes also other kinds of objective interactions in the field. The interactions link not only religious "firms," as is postulated by the market model, but also different types of actors attached to their social positions. This opens more analytic possibilities in regard to Islam. Moreover, Bourdieu puts more emphasis on transactions between religious specialists, who produce and disseminate religious goods, and the laity.

Another problem Bourdieu (1991) deals with includes his explorations of two further elements observable in every kind of competition: "capital" and "strategies." Including them into an analysis enables researchers to widen the scope of investigation proposed by advocates of religious economies. For Bourdieu, the model situation for his analysis was the process of monopolisation of power by the Catholic Church (Dianteill, 2003). Therefore, he often refers to a specific type of competition—between the orthodox hierarchy on the one side and adherents (*l'herésiarche*) on the other. An important aspect of this process was competition between different types of clerics. In Haiti, for example, competitive relations linked the Catholic Church with the Voodoo priests and their followers. Religious professionals compete for influence among various social strata for augmenting their own authority. To achieve this aim, they must also struggle for access to resources at stake and to employ special strategies.

Bourdieu's investigation into the types of capital used in religious field is more advanced than in the market approach. Each social field is characterised by distinct capitals employed in the process of competition. For instance, in the educational field degrees constitute the specific form of capital, and in the cultural field it is prestige. In the religious field, Bourdieu refers to religious capital. Among its main types are the legitimation of the social order and the kind of sense of meaning a religious doctrine brings to people (Rey, 2004, p. 337). Religious competitors also effectively use different sources of knowledge and authority. For Bourdieu, the most significant type of capital in the struggle for influence and power is what he calls "the goods of salvation" (*les biens de salut*) (1991, p. 299), which encompass sacraments or other means considered to be necessary to achieve salvation.

Religious capital is interrelated with other forms of capital, such as material (including financial) and social. In other words, capital can be transferred between different social fields. The redistribution of financial resources in times of radical political changes, such as those observed after the break-up of the Soviet monopoly, is conducive to a dramatic fight for payments for religious services, control over religious institutions and places of worship.

The access to unequally distributed religious and related forms of resources influences strategies that particular players choose in competition. Religious specialists have to choose how to legitimize their cause, what kind of arguments can effectively persuade their audience in the light of attacks from other sides. In the context of Central Asia, the claims made by participants in the struggle are, e. g., based on genealogy and hereditary titles of a certain group of people. They can refer to rituals led by specialists or to claims to an exclusive right to the control of holy places. This discourse is frequently enriched by moralistic arguments presenting the other side in a negative light (see Abashin, 2006).

Another problem raised in Bourdieu's writings that can hopefully add more inspiration to the subject of pluralism and its consequences is the transformation of religious doctrine. One of his main argument is that the structure of religious teaching is related to the interest and needs of two groups: producers and consumers (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 299). Religious doctrines and practices, that undergo transformations during competition, should thus be analysed from this perspective. Therefore, it can be argued that competition favours reinterpretation of religious traditions. The most intense sectarian activity, as Bourdieu noticed, coincides with the most dynamic production of Catholic canonical doctrine. To defend its ideology against heretical attacks, the Church responded with a new set of arguments and innovations in the ritualistic sphere. The well-known strategy used by the Catholic Church in the struggle for a monopolisation of capital and power in the religious field was the announcement of the formula *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, which tied access to salvation to one institution. In that way, all new religious enterprises, independent communities, prophets, or individual search for future reward were discredited. On the basis of this doctrine, weapons of "symbolic violence," such as excommunication or anathema, were developed (Bourdieu, 1991; Rey, 2004).

To sum up the above discussion, the theoretical model of an economic approach to religion is one of the most promising ways to advance social studies on religion. Its main thesis, which is still widely debated, posits that religious pluralism leads to an increase in the level of religious engagement. Two main factors influencing this relationship are competition between representatives of different religions or branches of religion and regulation of religious economy. This framework guides my analysis of contemporary religious situation in Azerbaijan, which basically will be conducted at three levels. I will be dealing with perspectives of the following actors: believers, representatives of Islamic traditions (religious leaders, theologians, Muslim intellectuals) and the state. In order to test the model in the context of Muslim Azerbaijan, some changes had to be applied. The most significant is the introduction of a concept "discursive traditions," that enables us to interpret pluralism without reducing it to its

institutional dimension. Among many traditions in Azerbaijan the book will focus on the most important and influential. Bourdieu's propositions regarding competing processes in the religious field will be applied in my analysis to explore more aspects of pluralism. His concepts of "capital" and "strategies" are useful tools to guide the field research. The final section of this chapter will provide information about the methodological program that has guided this work.

1.5 Fieldwork Research in Baku

This book analyses the contemporary transformations of religious traditions. It aims at understanding the process of competition between religious leaders and their communities as well as choices made by people regarding following particular forms of religion. Field research is one of the best ways to get closer to different socio-cultural worlds and to get first-hand experience in a particular society at a given moment. It enables a researcher to delve into agendas and motivations of religious movements and communities. Studying official documents and analysing statistics is helpful, but has limitations. The social world, especially the more private realm of religion and spirituality, is full of senses, emotions, symbols which are best approached in a direct encounter with people. Qualitative research can add a lot to uncovering human practices and ideologies.

The main sources and data for this study come from my research conducted in Azerbaijan in October–December 2009. It was part of my doctoral project entitled "Competing Islamic Traditions: An Anthropological Perspective." After having studied socio-religious changes and dynamics among Tatars in Poland and then among Muslim Kists near Georgian-Chechen border, I have decided to do larger research in Baku. While both in Poland and in Georgia Muslims constitute tiny minorities, Azerbaijan is a Muslim-majority country. This Caucasus state is bordered by countries of different religions: Eastern Orthodox Christian Georgia and Russia (with largely Islamic North Caucasus and many religious minorities), Christian Armenia with its unique Armenian Apostolic Church, and Iran having Shia Islam as its official religion. Azerbaijan is thus often evoked as a bridge between the East and the West. The locus of the study in the capital city of Azerbaijan was chosen for the reason that it provides a unique opportunity to observe the current process of Islamic revival against the background of post-Soviet secularism. So far, sociological research on religious markets have been largely confined to the Western context. The main theorists in the field of religion are from U.S. and Europe. The most comprehensive and systematic data are also from the Western world, where scientific studies of religion and social surveys have long tradition. It is thus understandable that most theories on

religious change and secularization relies upon the European and American experience, but extending their scope requires examining other contexts.

Three features of Azerbaijan make this country especially attractive to test and develop sociological theories. Firstly, the Islamic religion is the prevailing religion of society, not a religion of minorities. Western countries have different experience with religion and its public expression. Secondly, the issue of intra-religious diversity. Azerbaijan is very heterogeneous in regard to Islamic traditions. There are Sunni, Shia and Sufi Muslims with different religious worldviews and ideas. There is a further clash going on between conservative trends versus liberal. Modernist interpretations of Islam, which have a long history in Azerbaijan, are now regaining popularity. Thirdly, the post-Soviet particularities common to the whole vast part of the former Soviet empire. Baku, as a capital, has further advantages for the study of pluralism—it has attracted all kinds of religious groups. The city is in a boom and is growing rapidly at an unprecedented pace. It is the business, financial, cultural, educational centre of Azerbaijan. There are representatives of Iranian, Turkish and Arab Islamic movements, groups, missionaries in that city, each of them having followers and activists promoting their ideas. This fact makes it possible to observe competition between Islamic traditions on a daily basis. The public expression of religion makes it also a hot topic of discussions. Religious change is debated in newspapers, at schools and universities, at homes and in teahouses.

The group of my respondents and informants was not a probability sample of Azerbaijani Muslims, therefore it is not intended to be statistically representative. The selection of participants in the research was purposive, i. e., respondents were chosen because they had particular features important for the exploration of research problems (Qualitative Research, 2003). Members of the sample were chosen mainly to represent Shia and Sunni traditions, and, additionally, different groups inside each of these branches. It was important for me to conduct interviews with people who considered themselves to be "religious Muslims." I have not defined by myself what does a "religious person" mean, because it was one of my aims to get to know people's perceptions of religion and religiosity. At the very beginning of my research I noticed that it is the basic distinction people make themselves. The majority of Azeri Muslims, whom I call "cultural Muslims," perceive themselves as distinct from "religious Muslims." I was often advised that in order to understand Islam I should meet with the latter group. The symbolic boundary is huge, and at present even from the appearance one can categorise people in regard to their religious attachment. There are many exceptions, which I describe later, as the state regulations are against "untraditional" religious movements. But even so, people know who in their networks is "religious," or considers himself/herself as such.

By first presenting my position as a researcher, I conducted in-depth interviews with forty two Muslims, mostly "average" believers, but also with some religious leaders (from mosques, educational institutions, religious NGOs, or faith-based organizations) and a few Azerbaijani experts from academia and media on the religious situation and the politics of religion in the country. This number includes people from two focus groups, one carried out with female representatives of the Shia "Juma mosque" community, the other with a group of Sunnis (including one Salafi and one Sufi Muslim). My first contacts were established either with the help of various people related in some way to religion (researchers from universities in Baku, NGOs' representatives, journalists, etc.) or directly during my visits to mosques.

These interviews and discussions aimed at gathering information about choosing a religious affiliation, contents of Islamic traditions, the role of religious authority, attitudes towards other Islamic and non-Islamic religious movements, and about secular law. The questions were inspired by the theory of religious market and Bourdieu's concept of competition in the religious field. The sets of questions differed depending on the type of interviewee, whether it was a believer ("religious Muslim"), religious leader or an expert on religious situation. I have chosen semi-structured interviews as the method which allows uncovering new ideas and questions. While survey data classify people according to predetermined categories, the interviews are much more flexible and leave a space for including respondents' perspectives and understandings of social reality. The following kinds of questions served me as a general framework, which I adjusted to particular groups of people. First was the religious identity and the demand for religion. How are the particular religious identifications formed? I was enquiring "religious Muslims" about their personal experiences with Islam, their families background, how religion was expressed at home, and was it a Shia or Sunni branch. This included another set of questions: do they identify themselves with a particular Islamic branch or community? How do they define Islam? How did they make the choice and in what circumstances? What are the main sources of knowledge of religious issues? Which aspects of religion are important, and which have lesser significance? Do they participate in religious rituals? These questions helped me to identify the key divisions in contemporary Islamic market in Azerbaijan and provided me with a deeper understanding of each of them. A few times I was also given books about Islam, which my informants read and recommended to me. By reading them, I was learning the "religious language" of people and was able to nuance my questions. Exploring personal religious history, I also learned about Islam in the Soviet times, and the family stories made me realize how religiosity survived the state's oppression and an official policy of atheism. The background of the fam-

ily religiosity often was linked with the issue of religious switching. My interviewees were explaining how religion was practiced at their homes, often only during "rites of passage," and how they made choices of their own Islamic tradition. The hypothesis here was that the religious change was taking place and an Islamic religious market emerged in the 1990s. Religious suppliers emerged with several distinct reinterpretations of Islamic theology, practice, and relation to modernity and democracy.

Secondly, I was exploring strategies people employ in dealing with religious competition. I tried to understand which religious option is attractive for what kind of people? What are the determinants of religious affiliation? What makes certain religious practices and obligations appealing to people in the current context? What kind of factors influence religious choices? Framing this issue in the terms of market theory: What determines the success of religious suppliers? How they advertise themselves and attract people to their "brands"? Which products or services are especially looked for, and why? Next there were questions about religious leaders and competition between them. In this aspect I was looking into the dynamics of the religious field to better understand the interplay between religious actors (leaders, activists) in the same religious field. In Azerbaijan, the capital acquired by religious communities and leaders differ significantly and there is a large degree of inequality in this respect. The established "official" Islam (mainly Shiite) is close to the state, foreign missionaries often have support from their countries, mainly the Arab states, Iran or Turkey. This topic was addressed from two sides. I inquired "believers" about their views on religious authority. What do they expect from religious leaders and do they find proper leaders around? Which features make a leader or an imam especially charismatic? And, do people rely on what the leaders say? Talking to imams I was asking them about their perception of Islamic leadership and their attitudes to other Islamic groups. The answers show that many pious movements, which stand in opposition to the established Islam with the *sheikh-ul-islam* as the highest official religious authority in the country, seriously change the ideas on the essence of Islam. Also, the "official Islam" is responding to these challenges and also evolves its doctrine and expression. Islamic groups and their leaders rely on different kinds of capital and, using it, they develop and adapt their competitive strategies.

Thirdly, a couple of questions was related to the perception of the religious market. I was exploring respondents' knowledge and consciousness of the variety of Islamic branches in Azerbaijan. This set of question was intended to deal with the issue posed by the sociologists of religion: how do people react to the situation of pluralism? Is it a cognitive barrier which inclines people to doubt the truth presented by religion? Or is it a challenge? The discussion I had around this

topic revealed the mechanism by which people engaged in constant struggle to defend one's own religious convictions increase their level of religious commitment. This was one of the main discoveries in this project in the theoretical dimension.

Finally, the issue investigated here was secularism. I was asking whether people would accept the transformation of a secular state into a sharia-based form of government. It is a key issue whether religious revival and the rise of private and public interest in religion cause more support for the introduction of divine law of Islam, which applies to all spheres of life. Interestingly, the combination of "Muslim" and "secular" is not a contradiction for many people in Azerbaijan. Even religious Muslims in Azerbaijan support secular state and law, arguing that political secularism secures most religious values and norms.

After establishing first contacts in the field, the method that I used was so-called snowballing. In social sciences it means "asking people who have already been interviewed to identify other people they know who fit the selection criteria" (Qualitative Research, 2003, p. 94). It enabled me, among others, to interview some people representing the Salafi tradition. Salafi communities feel suspicious of outsiders suspecting them of spying for the state authorities. This is understandable in the context of the recent anti-religious atmosphere in Azerbaijani politics. Interviews were conducted in Russian, English, and in a few cases, with the help of translators, in Azeri. Interviewees' names are pseudonyms and appear as such in the book. Religious revival is a controversial issue, and state authorities look at religious expression with fear, and thus the security of respondents requires that real names are not given. The exception was made only in some cases of publicly known persons, such as authorities in mosques, who publicly share their opinions and gave their consent for publication of their interviews.

A key dimension of the fieldwork was participant observation. I have engaged in numerous informal conversations on religious topics with randomly met Muslims. It was surprising to find out how eagerly people became involved in such discussions, especially when I had not mention my status as a researcher. When I introduced myself as a Christian interested in Islamic religion, during, for instance, visits to local shops selling religious wares, I often got some valuable information without any inquiry. These conversations enabled me to get new insights which were then pursued in the interviews. I have also found a couple of informants who were introducing me to "secular Muslim" ways of life and understanding of the Islamic religion. Two students with whom I shared an apartment were telling me stories and giving information about religious beliefs and behaviors of their friends and families as well as about Azerbaijani customs. At the university, where I stayed for three months, there were some religious people

who also have helped me to notice additional problems and aspects of the religious situation. Besides, I used to visit mosques and *pirs* (*pīr*, in Azerbaijan—saint's shrine) to observe religious rituals and people participating in them. During those visits I was talking to people and often got engaged in conversations about religiosity in Azerbaijan or about particular "saints" whose tombs people visited. Many people were eager to share their histories or opinions with a stranger. I kept a field diary which includes all important observations and notes from informal discussions, as well as my comments and reflections. Each meeting is described, although in some cases, e. g., when discussion and conversations on religion spontaneously emerged, I was making notes later on, but as soon as possible to be sure that I remember the exact words and phrases. I tried to meet my acquaintances many times and discuss with them what I had learned on the topic of religion in the region. Besides discussing only religion, I was also trying to understand other aspects of life, which have an impact on Islam, such as political elections, current government's policy towards religion, speeches of the president, the classical music of Azerbaijan—*mugham* associated by some with Sufism. People shared with me their experience of economic crisis and hard conditions of everyday life for the majority of the capital's inhabitants. I was listening to peoples' personal stories, their choices in life, encounters with Islamic themes in various aspects of life. Finally, during all phases of the project, I have visited local libraries and studied relevant literature. I have also followed news related to Azerbaijan in order to get more acquainted with the general political, economic and social contexts in which religious competition takes place.

Apart from ethnographic research which was the fundament of the project, I have also studied existing sociological surveys related to religion and religiosity in the Caucasus. The most comprehensive are the surveys from the Caucasus Research Resource Centre (CRRC), which has been established in 2003 by the Eurasia Partnership Foundation. CRRC is a network of research centres operating in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia which runs survey projects and gather empirical data on social, cultural, political and economic topics, including problems central to public policy. There are also independent surveys by local researchers or NGOs. I have focused on religious questions, and present some data and analyses in the section on "Secularized Muslims" of the chapter 4 "Lived Islam." The quantitative data are interesting, as they provide a general picture of religious landscape and show the degree of secularization. The reflections on the challenges of Islamic religion in the Caucasus I have included in a separate paper (Wiktor-Mach, 2012).

Chapter 2
Islam in the Caucasus: Historical Contexts of Religious Pluralism

Religious Identity and History

Many scholars writing on Islam in the former socialist region claim that in order to understand current religious dynamics we need to turn back to the Soviet experiments with society and politics. An analysis of communism, its ideology and anticlerical practices is thought to open the gate to our understanding of contemporary Muslim identity in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Indeed, the Soviet impact was profound and it is still noticeable everywhere, in all aspects of social life. It introduced new architectural styles with monumental buildings, massive housing projects and new aesthetic principles. It reformed workplaces and everyday bureaucracy. The Soviet war with religion led to the destruction of mosques, deadly attacks on religious leaders and observant Muslims. Emancipation of women and the ban on Islamic veil radically changed the way Muslim women used to live and work. Lots of such Soviet actions had an overwhelming influence on peoples' lives.

Adeeb Khalid's opinion that "[s]oviet understandings of culture and identity remain dominant in Central Asia" (2007: 3) is equally valid in the Caucasus two decades after the end of Soviet empire. In this aspect, there are striking similarities between Islam in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan in Central Asia and the Republic of Azerbaijan, which is situated in between Russia, Armenia, Georgia and Iran.

As Khalid, one of the greatest experts on Islam in the post-communist region, argues—in order to deeply understand current Islam and its ambivalent links with politics and the public sphere, we shall learn the lesson of the Soviet deep and long-lasting transformation of society and culture. Undoubtedly, Soviet times require our attention. There are still gaps in our knowledge of this period, some of which may be filled with only after the full opening of archives.

In my view, to fully appreciate the contemporary Azerbaijani identity, we must first look deeper into the region's long history. Lots of Azeris, at least in Baku, tend to speak of their country as an exceptional place of cultural pluralism and religious tolerance. It is, they say, a place of rich cultural and religious heritage, both material and spiritual. In justifying this position they often use historical arguments. The narrative of various religions existing side by side and of religious freedom is taken for granted. This tradition of tolerance and cultural

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coexistence in the South Caucasus is eagerly evoked nowadays by many Azerbaijanis. People like to underline the "idyllic past" of the ethnic and religious mix as a proof of their country's exceptional tolerance towards the others.[1]

In the Muslim majority country, where over 90 percent of people underline their Muslim-ness, this rhetoric of tolerance was one that caught my attention since my first days in Azerbaijan. It was not a distance to Christianity or Judaism that they underlined. Neither was is the "clash of civilisations" attitude. For an average person being a Muslim in Azerbaijan means being a "moderate" Muslim, i. e., tolerant and open to other faiths. That's what they say and are proud of. It does not mean having much knowledge on other religions, but an approach that accepts otherness, at least in the religious aspect. As a Christian, I have not encountered a single incident of religious intolerance nor hatred for this reason. People were eager to talk with me, to invite me to their homes. My religious background was not a problem at all. At the very beginning it was surprising for me, as I was aware of the intense emotions related to the unresolved conflict with Christian Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. I had expected more troubles and complications.

Researchers, such as Jennifer S. Wistrand (2012), also acknowledge this surprising paradox and quite exceptional stance of Muslim Azeris on religious tolerance. In an article "Azerbaijan and 'Tolerant Muslims'," she suggests that this discourse can be understood in relation to two factors. One of them is the current geopolitical situation and Azerbaijan's aspirations in world politics. The country has been conducting balanced, or multi-vector, diplomacy and foreign policy (Strakes, 2013). It tries to build good relations with US and the European Union, which look with a great deal of suspicion at Iran—Azerbaijan's close neighbour. Iranian theocracy frightens the West. There is a fear that the Islamic revolution will spread over the region. Azerbaijan, a Shiite country, is thus under surveillance. To gain and retain recognition on the global stage, it must distance itself from the fundamentalist attitudes which are commonly attributed to Iran, especially in mass media. The second factor, Wistrand argues, is Azerbaijanis' conception of their own history. It can be summarized with the words of an Azeri scholar, Anar Gafarov (2010: 3) from the Azerbaijan National Academy of Sciences: "Azerbaijan has a well-deserved reputation for religious tolerance, a country whose people respect each other's faiths." This view of the nation's history seems to prevail in the society. In the course of past centuries Azerbaijani lands were places of worship for a number of religious traditions. This multi-eth-

1 The discourse of pluralism and cosmopolitanism in the context of Baku is well analysed by Bruce Grant (2010).

nic and multi-cultural history is still influencing the present. The traces of religious diversity are everywhere, most notably in the cultural landscape. Apart from mosques and pirs, the scenery of the Caucasus is embellished with churches of various Christian denominations, synagogues, fire temples and other places of worship.

There is another, more important reason to study the cultural history of the region. Historical context can shed light on the power relations between various religions and, what's even more important in this context, between various currents inside Islam, especially Sunnism, Shiism, and some Sufi networks. The heterodoxy of religious models might have contributed to the undogmatic interpretations of Islam. Especially Sufism, a mystical trend in Islam, was in some historical periods intertwined with local culture and influenced peoples' world views. In such perspective, the form and content of religion, the ideas and symbols are deeply linked with political and social changes, geopolitical situation and economic factors.

There are five distinct phases which shaped the religious and cultural history in the Caucasus. The first of the turning points was the introduction of Islam and the subsequent competition with Christianity, Zoroastrianism and other religions. During the next phase, which commenced around the ninth century, new players entered the ethnic landscape of the territory known as Azerbaijan nowadays and changed the demographic and cultural situation. Turkic and Mongol tribes brought with them their own models of Islamic practice, beliefs, knowledge production and religious authority. The establishment of Shiism as an official religion of the Safavid empire in 1501 marked the beginning of a new episode in the Azerbaijani history. That event linked Shia Islam with the power of the state, with all privileges and threats such an alliance offers to religion. During the fourth phase, characterised by the Russian conquests in the Caucasus, secular ideas were successfully and permanently introduced into the spectrum of Azerbaijani ideological worldviews. That was the time of reformist movements that raised ferment among Azeri elites and made them rethink the relation between Islam and modernity. Secularized Azerbaijani elites either tended to downplay religion, offering nationalist alternatives to solely religious identities, or attempted to modernise religious traditions. Last but not least, the communist policies effectively prevented or restricted public manifestation of religion, with an unintended effect of pragmatic cooperation between various groups of Islam. Sunni and Shia differences ceased to be important in the context of a common communist opponent. These developments will be dealt with more deeply in this and the next chapters and will provide a background to the contemporary religious revival.

2.1 Islamization of the Land of Fire

It was already in the seventh century that Islam made its way into the Caucasus. In 639 CE, the army led by Bukair ibn Abdullah invaded Azerbaijan territories for the first time. The peace agreement that followed the conquest is quoted by a Muslim historian Jarir at-Tabari (838 – 923) in his opus magnum *The History of the Prophets and Kings:*

> In the name of Allah gracious merciful. That is what Utba ibn Farkad governor (amil) of the master of faithful Omar ibn Hattab grants to the inhabitants of Azerbaijan (...), inhabitants of its plains and mountains, its suburbs, inhabitants of its religious community. They all were granted life (aman), inviolability of property (mal), their faith (milla) and laws (shari'a) with a condition of payment by them the head money (jizia) within their opportunities. But jizia was not levied on children, women and chronically ill people as well as on those who had no means for living, on hermits, devotes (...) who had no profit. That aman was granted to them as well as those who lived with them. Their responsibility was to support Muslim warriors during day and night and to show them way. If anybody of them would be called in the army then he was relieved from the tax (at-Tabari, 1963, as cited in Yunusov (2004)).

Gradually, as the caliphate was expanding and consolidating, the Arabs mixed with the local population, and the Islamic religion gradually spread in the region. At that time, the dominant religious traditions were Christianity (the Caucasian Albanian church), Zoroastrianism, Manicheism and various pagan religions (Lemercier-Quelquejey, 1984, p. 29). The new faith was spread along with Muslim successes at the battlefield.

Military successes of the Islamic army did not lead to the annihilation of opponents. Although tributes and taxes were levied from the conquered population, according to some historical accounts, non-Muslim religions under the Muslim rule enjoyed a certain degree of freedom. For example, the Arabs did agree to respect the fire temples (Shaffer, 2002, p. 18). In fact, both Zoroastrianism and Christianity, although being seriously marginalised, managed to survive up to the present. Zurab Konanchev (2003), the founder of the Albanian Research Center, claims that in contemporary Azerbaijan there is a community of Udins who are said to be the direct descendants of the Caucasian Albanians.

The scholarship on Zoroastrians in Azerbaijan is scarce and it's hard to estimate the number of worshippers. There is a unique testimony of a Zoroastrian community residing in Baku in the first half of the nineteenth century (Shapira, 2001, p. 105). Today, Zoroastrianism has retained primarily its symbolic form. On the north of Baku, in the village of Surakhani, there is still an active fire temple—the *Ātašgāh* (from Persian, "home of fire"). Historically, the burning natural gas, which was quite exceptional, was worshipped by Zoroastrians and Hindus alike.

Figure 2.1 Zoroastrian Fire Temple near Baku

During my visit to the *Ātašgāh* in October 2009, I had an impression that the Fire Temple serves most of all as a museum and a tourist attraction. There were few Americans taking photographs of the statues depicting Zoroastrian worshippers of fire. Guides were explaining some rituals and objects related to this religion, as if they were giving lecture on an ancient, buried history. For them, Zoroastrianism seemed to be an element of a folk culture than of a living religion. This is not surprising given that hardly any Azeri identifies himself with Zoroastrianism. Most statistics on religion in the Caucasus omit this religion. However, once a year the *Ātašgāh* changes its functions. According to my guide, few worshipers of fire from Azerbaijan and from other countries gather every year at this temple during the Zoroastrian New Year (*Novruz*).

Why was Islamization so successful? The answer is not straightforward and still under debate. At the beginning of the seventh century AD, during the life of the Prophet Muhammad, nobody imagined the new religion would conquer vast areas stretching from the Iberian Peninsula till the steppes of Central Asia. Apart from theological explanations that emphasise supernatural interventions, there are also other complementary interpretations from the perspective of social sciences. First of all, the internal and military weaknesses of the entire Middle East

and the Caucasus at that time. In the seventh century the lands now known as Azerbaijan constituted the areas of wars, the most significant being the conflict between the Byzantine and Persian Sassanid empires. The bloody fighting contributed to a serious economic crisis. By the first quarter of the seventh century, the territory of Azerbaijan had completely been ruined and therefore vulnerable to attacks (Yunusov, 2004).

Apart from sheer military power, ideology had an impact in ensuring successful Islamization. It was at the period of rapid expansion of the umma that the Islamic concept of jihad was developed by Muslim scholars.[2] The power of an ideological justification that the war against unbelievers is desirable is sometimes used as an explanation of the fact that Arabs, who lacked sufficient forces, were so successful. It's easier to risk one's life when heavenly rewards are promised. Additionally, Muslim jurists worked out the concepts of *dār al-īslām* (land of Islam) and *dār al-ḥarb* (land of war). The former describes states under the Muslim authority, where sharia is in force, while the latter term denotes non-Muslim territories where strife for Islam should continue. Muslims have an obligation to sacrifice their lives for the sake of God and his rule.

Another factor explaining the Islamization of the Azerbaijani society is the relatively tolerant attitude of Muslim winners towards the local population. As elsewhere, the basic aim of jihad in the Caucasus was not to convert unbelievers to Islam, but to expand the *dār al-īslām*. Islamic law provides for the co-existence of people holding different religious beliefs. Jews and Christians, as "people of the Book" (*ahl al-kitāb*) enjoyed the status of "protected people" (*ahl aḏ-ḏimma*), whereby they were granted autonomy in religious matters. In exchange, non-Muslims generally were obliged to pay tax (*ğizya*). The concept of *ahl aḏ-ḏimma* was subsequently widened to include Zoroastrians (Danecki, 2002a, p. 259). In such circumstances, Islamic religion was not imposed on people in

2 The nuanced meanings of the term jihad in the Koran are far from the popular associations with the Islamic version of "holy war." In fact, there are two other words in the Scripture that denote war and warring: *qitāl*, and *ḥarb*. The former is commonly used in the Koran to represent warring, including divinely ordained warring; its meaning is rooted in warlike conditions of nomadic life. The latter tends to mean "engaging in profane war." On the other hand, the basic meaning of the root of jihad, j.h.d., does not refer directly to fighting; it is described in Arabic dictionaries as ,,exerting oneself and taking extraordinary pains, employing oneself vigorously and diligently" (Firestone, 2009, 308–309). In religious interpretation, the term jihad refers to the ethical message of Islam to strive for good deeds and to overcome evil. It was during the Arab conquests that the word jihad became the operative term for war authorised by Allah, and was developed in a doctrine by a jurist Muhammad as-Shaybani (d. 796). Nevertheless, this association with "holy war" is only one of a range of ideas the term jihad conveys (Firestone, 2009; Danecki, 2002a, 251–256).

any direct way. It constituted a religious option to choose or to reject, though it must have been quite an attractive option. Embracing Islam created a possibility of an upward mobility or simply enabled maintaining one's privileges. It is not therefore surprising that the majority of the first converts to Islam recruited themselves from craftsmen, traders, and townspeople, eager to avoid paying *ğizya*, and from local feudal families interested in maintaining their social status.

Early Islamization was not straightforward. There were some circumstances which retarded this process. The policy of Islamic caliphates played a crucial role. The Umayyad dynasty (661–750) was engaged in the territorial expansion of the caliphate and in political and bureaucratic issues. Pursuing expansion towards the Indian subcontinent, North Africa, southern Italy, and the Iberian Peninsula, the Umayyads were not so much interested in converting unbelievers (*kuffār*). The growing empire needed, first of all, to care for its budget. Massive conversions to Islam would entail massive exemptions from *ğizya*, meaning a significant reduction of the potential caliphate's wealth. Thus, the state adopted an idea of class society; the highest class included ruling Muslims headed by the caliph and his court, next were the new non-Arab Muslims (*mawālī*), mostly Persians, Turks and Kurds, followed by *ahl aḏ-ḏimma*, and slaves at the end of the social hierarchy. For non-Arabs, the decision to embrace Islam was on the one hand encouraged by offering a promotion to a higher social class, but on the other hand discouraged by restrictions of the *mawlā* status, meaning the lack of equal rights among Muslims (Bocheński, 1971). Such policy was in force till the Abbasid dynasty took up the reins in 750. The revolt against the Umayyads was strongly supported by Muslims of other than Arab origin, as well as by the Shiites. With the change of the ruling dynasty, the Arab supremacy basically came to an end. Islam was no longer perceived as a national property reserved for the Arabs. The caliphate was transformed into a cosmopolitan, multinational and theocratic state. Accepting Islamic faith with its new universal mission became easier and more rewarding.

Islam owes its tremendous success also to its flexibility. Much akin to Christianity, the Islamic religion became attractive and more acceptable to Azerbaijanis for the reason that it incorporated some deep-rooted traditions, to which people felt emotional attachment. Islam reinterpreted many elements of other religions to make them coherent with the spirit of the Koran. It turned out to be adaptable to local cultural contexts, instead of initiating a revolt. It happened, for instance, with religious holidays. The Shia ulama managed to convince people that the Persian celebration of the New Year, *Novruz*, is very Islamic in its nature, and represents the succession of Ali, one of the central figure in Shia history (Smirnov, 1934, as cited in Rohoziński (2005)). Other Zoroastrian symbols, in a similar way, entered and enriched the Islamic Shiite tradition.

Such similarities made it easier for people to accept the new religion as their own.

The appearance and subsequent popularity of Shiism in Azerbaijan may have contributed to the success of the Muslim religion in that part of the world. It must be underlined that the Islamic landscape was always highly pluralistic, especially outside the Arab cultural area. Sects mushroomed and their mix of religious, social and economic ideas secured mass support. The vast territories of Persia, which since the times of Median and Achaemenid Empires included also Azerbaijan, attracted all kinds of dissidents and rebels. Shia ideology gave them opportunities to express their socio-economic or political resistance in religious terms. A significant opposition to Arab rule united around the Alids—descendants of Ali, regarded by them as the only true, legitimate successor to the Prophet Muhammad. Alids defended the concept of the umma, which tended to be undermined in practice by Arabs, who preferred to employ ethnic, and not religious, rules in building the caliphate. Having attracted some support in Persia, Shiites led numerous rebellions against the authority of the Sunni caliphate (Składanek, 1995; Baranowski & Baranowski, 1987).

Among the movements, the Khurramites were exceptionally powerful. They drew upon various Zoroastrian and Shiite symbols. The famous leader of Khurramites, Babek, came from the province of Ardabil (where up to now the majority of inhabitants is ethnically Azeri, they are called also Iranian Azeris, as this province belongs to Iran at present), known for its religiosity. Babek, who changed his name from a Muslim one, Hasan, to a name exceptionally respected in the Zoroastrian tradition, is said to lead a fight against orthodox Sunni Islam. His movement's activities in the ninth century are often referred to as the last struggles of Zoroastrianism and other non-Muslim beliefs in the Caucasus against Islamization. After the defeat of the Khurramites, Islamic victory was almost completed, although information about that movement appeared until the sixteenth century. What remained of it was partly adopted by radical Shiite sects, such as *ahl-e ḥaqq* (people of the truth), known also as *ʿalī ʾilāhi* (Ali is God); the latter term referring to a belief in the divinity of Ali (Yunusov, 2004, p. 51).

2.2 Turks and Mongols

The next crucial phase for Azerbaijan that influenced its complex religious identities was the appearance of Turkic tribes. Seljuk Turks came from the steppes of Central Asia and invaded southwestern regions of Asia. They converted to Islam between the 9th and 11th centuries, and set out to propagate the Hanafi version of Sunnism, along with the Turkic language and culture. On the basis of the Turk-

ic language, Azerbaijani was created, and came later to replace both Iranian and Caucasian dialects.[3] Some groups of Turks came to settle down in the Caucasia—a process which altered the ethnic composition of the local population and reinforced the Islamization and Turkification of native populations, which results can be seen even today. Turkish culture is for many contemporary Azeris a vital point of reference in their daily lives, and the brotherhood between Turkey and Azerbaijan is stressed again and again.

Seljuk rules influenced the existing religious traditions and beliefs. Being zealous Sunni Muslims, Turks ruthlessly struggled with all manifestations of Shiism. Shia communities, however, managed to survive persecutions. Among their strongest weapons was the practice of *taqiyya* (religiously sanctioned practices of dissimulation). It was incorporated into the realm of Shia ideas quite early, when the followers of Ali found out that expressing their true convictions in the context of a combat was fruitless or dangerous. *Taqiyya* as a concept enables believers to hide or deny their beliefs under several conditions, such as threat, persecution, or compulsion. Hence, most people supporting Shiism in Azerbaijan seemingly switched to Sunnism. Shiite rituals went underground (Baranowski & Baranowski, 1987; Steigerwald, 2009). Such strategy proved useful for the survival of the Shia tradition. If researchers surveyed the population at that time, they would find orthodox Sunni beliefs and practices to be prevalent. In case of a real danger, Shiites were obliged not only to hide their beliefs, but also to act convincingly as Sunnis. Sometimes they even cursed publicly Shiism and Shia practices, just to deceive their enemies.

A multitude of active sects with Shiite influences arouse threats among local feudal lords and invaders. The most dangerous factor was the massive and secret support for Shiism. For a long time Caucasian people respected a radical Shia group known as the Ismailis. The Ismaili doctrine shows signs of Manichaean and Neoplatonist influences. Even though this sect was persecuted by Sunnis during the Abbasid caliphate, they managed to attract new supporters in many regions of Persia, in Bahrain, Yemen, and even in India (Thorval, 2002). Their presence in Azerbaijan is known from the poem of a renowned twelfth-century artist Nizami Ganjavi "The Storehouse of Mysteries" (*maḫzan al-asrār*). Many vivid legends describe the activities of one of the best-known leaders of the Ismailis—Rashid ad-Din Sinan, known widely as the Old Man of the Mountain. His "pirate-state" encompassed lands of Southern Azerbaijan. Having at-

3 Even though the Persian language and culture was influential in the Azeri literature for a long time, the history of written Azerbaijani has its roots in the thirteenth century (Azerbaijan, 2008, p. 98).

Table 2.1 An outline chronology of Azerbaijan from the 7th till the early 20th century. Source: adapted from Lapidus (2002).

Islam introduced to Azerbaijan by Arab armies	7th century
Sunni Islam propagated by Turkic tribes	9–11 centuries
Mongol conquest	1219
Ilhkanid dynasty	1256–1336
Iran (and Azerbaijan) partitioned among local regimes	1336–
Conquest by Timur	1370–1405
Succession states	
Qara Qoyunlu	1380–1468
Aq Qoyunlu	1378–1508
Safavids	
Sufi masters	
Safi al-Din Ishaq	d. 1334
Sadr al-Din	d. 1391
Khwaja ʿAli	d. 1429
Ibrahim	d. 1447
Junayd	d. 1460
Haydar	d. 1488
Ismaʿil I	d. 1524
Safavid conquest of Iran	1501–1510
Safavid dynasty	1501–1722
Ismaʿil I	1501–1524
ʿAbbas I	1588–1629
Death of Nadir Shah and the end of Iranian supremacy over Azerbaijan	1747
Turkmenchay Treaty: the division of Azerbaijan between Russia and Iran	1828
Azerbaijan Democratic Republic	1918–1920

tracted his faithful and obedient disciples, he made them murder unfavourable governors. His followers allegedly dreamed of dying as martyrs. The supply of those ready-to-die people reached such a degree that Hassan used to sell his professional killers to anybody who offered him money. The social support for the Old Man and his Assassins was strong in Azerbaijan and northern Iran. They killed feudal lords and they stood on the side of the poor. Even after the defeat of this "empire" by the Mongols, the local population remained attached to the Ismailis. That was another factor that added to future successes of Shiism (Thorval, 2002; Baranowski & Baranowski, 1987; Pashazade, 2005).

In the times of Turkic westward invasions, some local rulers in Azerbaijan enjoyed a certain level of autonomy. Among the most powerful was the Shirvanshah dynasty that established a khanate with Baku as its capital (from 1191) and promoted Islamic religion and culture. The court attracted theologians, scholars, artists, and various religious specialists. Around the 11–12th centuries, the social

stratum of clergymen was formed. Its characteristics varied depending on a state. The emergence of religious officials was made easier by the unclear role the caliph played for the Muslim community. Officially, he was the one responsible for governing and judging all Muslims. That was the theory. In reality, the territory of the caliphate was too vast and needed other administrative solutions and strategies. As a part of his duties, the caliph was obliged to counsel seminary students in religiously controversial or uncertain issues. In this process, a new religious function emerged: an "assistant" of a caliph, called *muftī*. His advisory role included issuing of fatwas (legal opinions on Islamic law). Gradually, the status of a *muftī* changed. In Azerbaijan, the function of *sheikh-ul-islam* (az. şeyx-ül-Islam) appeared for the first time in the second half of the tenth century (Yunusov, 2004, p. 57), and later became the most important in the local religious organization. At first the term was assigned to respected ulama or Sufis. Later, it served Ottoman caliphs as a position of the top of the hierarchy of *muftīs*. Another important function that developed in Azerbaijan was that of a chief judge (*qāḍī*), who supervised the observance of the sharia and fulfilling religious duties. Other main religious roles included: imams of Friday mosques, teachers of madrasas, *sayyids* (or, *sādah*)—descendants of Prophet Mohammed or other Imams' families, and sheikhs who headed Sufi brotherhoods. The social classes most closely related to the clergy were, apart from rulers, craftsmen and traders. Muslim schools existed in bigger cities of Azerbaijan, and were usually related to mosques. Madrasas in Tabriz, Ganja, and Barda were among the schools that enjoyed especially high status (Baranowski & Baranowski, 1987; Rohoziński, 2005).

Sufism was another Islamic tradition that enriched the religious landscape. Not only did the Turks initiate various Sufi activities, but also promoted this branch of Islam among their subjects. Again, the policy of a sovereign had deep influence on choices made by people. Sufi brotherhoods, *ṭarīqas* (or, *ṭuruq*), contributed to the Islamization of Turkic and Mongolian tribes in Central Asia. Sufi practices enjoyed such popularity that Turkish leaders had no choice but to take it into consideration. In spite of attacks from some segments of the ulama, Sufi sheikhs were successfully undertaking missionary travels to attract followers. Governors often supported the erection of Sufi lodges (called *ḫānaqāh* in Persian, and *tekke* in Turkish), which served as shelters for dervishes and as focus of religious teachings and poetry. Quickly, they became centres of collective life and of worship for believers. There were shelters for the teachers and students with a kitchen. Often the lodges were built near mosques (or places adapted to mosques for the purpose of collective prayer) or madrasas. In some cases, a *ḫānakā* served as a tomb of a Sufi mystic or other venerated figure known for his miraculous abilities, in other it was built next to the shrines. Mus-

lims used to make pilgrimages to those places to pray and ask for favours. The practice of a pilgrimage, *ziyārat* (lit. visit), to the tombs of venerated saints, scholars, or Imams became particularly widespread in the 13th and 14th centuries. In Turkey, the first *tekke*s were related to the great Sufi poet and master, *Ğālal ad-Dīn Rūmī*. They were found all over the Turkish and Persian cultural area, including Iran, Central Asia and South Asia. Their counterpart in the Maghreb was called *zāwiyā*. A few of the Sufi *ḫānakās* exist still nowadays in Azerbaijan: *Pir*-Mardakan and *Pir*-Huseyn *ḫānakā* near Shamakhi, the Giz Galasi *ḫānakā* in Ismayilly region (Yunusov, 2004, p. 55). The most popular group in the Southern Caucasus was Yasaviyya, founded by a Turkic mystic, poet and Sufi sheikh, Ahmad Ibn Ibrahim al-Yasavi (d.1166). Yasaviyya doctrine inspired other Sufi fraternities in the Azerbaijan region: the Halvatiyya and Bayramiyya, which originated in Tabriz (Trimingham, 1998, as quoted in Yunusov (2004)).

Were Sufi brotherhoods based on Sunni or Shia Islam? The answer to this question is not clear. Sufism undoubtedly appealed to various social groups, and managed to attract even pagan tribes. The above-mentioned brotherhoods in Azerbaijan were probably based on Sunni Muslims. There were also brotherhoods known for their Shia affiliations, e. g., Kubraviyya or Haydariyya (Yunusov, 2004, p. 54). However, due to the hegemony of Sunni Seljuks at that period, the practice of *taqiyya* enabled numerous Shiites to survive by keeping their true beliefs secret and pretending to be Sunnis or Sufis. The estimation of the proportions and popularity of particular branches in Islam is therefore to some extent flawed. Clearly, Sufism turned out to be remarkably attractive among the local population and managed to merge with both Sunni and Shia doctrines, although controversy over the "purity" of Muslim religion appeared. However, it is also probable that the religious systems of beliefs were not as complete or homogeneous as they are nowadays.

After the Turks introduced new religious concepts and understandings of Islamic religion, next changes on the religious market were brought by the Mongol people who carried military campaigns to Azerbaijani lands in the first half of the 13th century. South Caucasus got incorporated into the Mongolian empire of the Ilkhans. The Mongol rules brought Azerbaijani people devastation, social unrest and a bloody conflict. Vast territories were depopulated by Mongol armies, and new settlers of Turkish and Mongol origins appeared. Although a relative autonomy of local dynasties was allowed, the Islamic domination of religious market in Azerbaijan was in danger. Competition from other religions got tough. Buddhists and Nestorian Christians came with the conquerors from Central Asian steppes. Under the patronage of new rulers, pagan temples were built, and Shamanism flourished.

The anti-Islamic sentiments of the Ilkhanate dynasty were not unambiguous. They were aware of a variety of Islamic expressions and actors and consciously differentiated between groups of Muslims. On one hand, the already established class of Islamic clergy was seen by the rulers with suspicion. Thus, affluent religious specialists suffered discrimination and repression. On the other hand, Sufi dervishes and Sufi *ṭarīqas* gained a lot of respect and managed to increase their status in society. According to some researchers, Sufism enabled the survival of Islamic religion and contributed to its future growth (Yunusov, 2004).

The initial destabilisation of the religious field under the rule of the Ilkhans was hampered by a couple of developments. The most influential was the conversion of some Mongol khans to Islam. Unlike Arabs, who had a profound impact on local languages and cultures, the Mongols were absorbed by the Persian civilisation and Islamic religion. Further, rivalries between Mongol regimes resulted in the invasion of the Golden Horde on the Mongolian Ilkhanid State. The Golden Horde had already been Islamised and thus treated by Azerbaijanis as a liberator rather than an invader. In 1295, a Buddhist Mongol, Mahmud Ghazan, became a khan and adopted Islam. The military elite followed his decision and changed religion. For the conversion ceremony Ghanzam called a Shiite Sufi from Khorasan, not a local Sunni scholar. Ghazan's rule led to the re-emergence of Islam as the state religion. Following official decrees, mosques, madrasas, and other Islamic institutions were built, while temples of unbelievers were destroyed. As a zealous convert, Ghazan turned against all idolaters forcing them to make a choice: either they leave Azerbaijan or accept Islam (Yunusov, 2004).

Some data on the religious structure of the South Caucasus during the Mongol era can be obtained from geographic sources from the 13–14th centuries (Yunusov, 2004, pp. 62–64). Those writings reveal the diversity of religious manifestations, with the emphasis of Muslim pluralism. Accordingly, some Christian communities are mentioned in the city of Shahr Islam (in the past known as Udjan). The majority of Muslims adhered to Sunnism and followed the Shafii *maḏhab* (school of law, literally—path, conduct, opinion). Less influence had the Hanafi *maḏhab*, with followers concentrated in the Marga region. Sources confirm also the presence of the sheikh Safi ad-Din *ṭarīqa* in Ardabil. Finally, a small number of Shiites is acknowledged. The level of religious diversity varies; in some region only one religious trend dominates. Inhabitants of Ganja, according to the encyclopaedia of Zakariya al-Qazvini, are said to strictly follow Sunnism and discourage anyone professing a different faith from settling in their city. On the contrary, Tabriz accommodated various believers, although the Shafii *maḏhab* dominated. The institutional arrangements reflected the social diversity. In the Ilkhanid state, four chief *qāḍīs* were elected; each represented one of *maḏ-*

habs. It must be noted that the term *maḏhab* had slightly broader meaning than simply the canonical school (Amoretti, 1986).

Both the Turks and the Mongols aspired to spread control over religious life of their subjects, and their preferences in this subject had real consequences. One of the most clearly perceptible aspects was financial support. The imams, heads of Islamic schools, sheikhs, and other religious officials who were favoured by the state received not only support but also salary. Yet, despite of favouring certain traditions at the expense of others, some level of pluralism inside Islamic religion was maintained through centuries.

To sum up, the Middle Ages in the Caucasus were characterised by the reinforcement of Islam, which became a dominant religion. Both Sunnism and Shiism gained strength, and a lot of various expressions of Islamic religion appeared, in many cases formed from mixing with non-Islamic religions, local traditions and cultures. It's probable that the diversity of Islamic traditions, adapted to the local life, was one of the main factors which enabled the survival and the flourishing of Islam in that part of the world. Different forms of religious practice and doctrines, as well as the engagement of Islamic leaders in social and political issues, have responded to the needs and preferences of particular social groups. The Islamic traditions were further reinforced by the process of institutionalization of Islam. It led to an emergence of a class of religious specialists, who, at least in part, collaborated with the state in exchange for support.

2.3 State Shiism

Another turning point for Iranian and Azerbaijani religious situation, a breakthrough with far-reaching consequences for society, culture, politics, was in the early sixteenth century. It was in 1501 when Shah Ismail I (reigned 1501–1525) gained power over vast Iranian lands and proclaimed the Twelver Shia Islam (*Ithnā ʿashariyya*) the official religion of his new theocratic empire. This successful military commander, spiritual leader, and a legislative reformer initiated a long, lasting up to now, period of dominance of one Islamic tradition in Iran (and in Azerbaijan). The Safavid dynasty reigned in Iran till 1722.

Safavid Shiism developed or strengthened certain forms of piety. The most characteristic is the focus on pilgrimage to holy sites connected to the Twelve Shia Imams and their families. Safavids promoted Shia rituals, such as the annual re-enacting of the historical event seen as the greatest tragedy in the history of Shiism. On the tenth day of *Muḥarram*, the first month of the Islamic Lunar Calendar (this particular day is referred to as *ʿĀšūrāʾ*) in 680 CE, the Shia hero, Imam Husayn ibn ʿAli, was killed by the caliph Yazid at the place of Kar-

bala. For Shiites, it was a killing of a legitimate heir to the Muslim state. This episode of history is crucial to Iranian national identity as a founding myth that for centuries retained its function. The anniversary of Husayn's death is celebrated by all Shia communities in a very solemn way. It is central event in the Iranian's religious calendar. There are "passion plays," "religious dramas," known as *taʿziye*, mourning rituals, in which the tragedy of Karbala is performed. Although the theatrical ceremonies were performed earlier in Iran and Iraq, Safavids promoted those forms of emotional religious gatherings and used them as a political tool. In the sixteenth century Muharram ceremonies became popular among the inhabitants of major urban centres, such as Isfahan, Tabriz or Shiraz (Rahimi, 2013, pp. 57–58).

The Career of the Safavid Order

To account for the success of Shiism in Iran and Azerbaijan, let us briefly examine the social roots of the Shah Ismail and his supporters. The direct beginnings of the Safavid career can be linked to a formerly mystical Sunni Sufi *ṭarīqa*, called Safaviyya, which subsequently transformed itself into a powerful radical Shiite organization hostile to any signs of Sufism. This unusual transformation was not coincidental—it reflects the complex relationships between sheikhs and their supporters in the changing milieu of unstable regimes, which emerged after the end of Mongol invasions.

The Safaviyya movement, which gave rise to the Safavid dynasty, made its first appearance in the 13th century in Ardabil, which today belongs to Iranian Azerbaijan. The founder—Safi ad-Din Ishaq (1254–1334) (known as the "Great Sufi")—most probably descended from a Kurdish family. Later, to justify their religious and political aspirations, Safavids used to claim descent from the seventh imam Musa al-Kazim to enhance their religious legitimation. According to Ira Lapidus (2002, p. 286), by putting stress on the hereditary descent as a basis of succession, the Safavids ensured the stabilisation of Iran for a few centuries.

How did a single Sufi *ṭarīqa* manage to attract so many supporters to be able to successfully overthrow the existing order? First of all, Sufi fraternities had a long tradition of active engagement in socio-political affairs. Not only did they practice various mystical forms of religion, but also they used to take part in the public life of their societies. When there was a need for resistance against oppressors, Sufis used to organize and lead local social movements to unite the unprivileged. The period which followed the Mongol rule favoured rather the authority of Sufi masters, sorcerers and shamans than Islamic orthodox scholars. Religious leadership was based more upon esoteric knowledge or magical abil-

ities (Lapidus, 2002, pp. 283 – 284). The principle of loyalty and obedience of the *murīds* (followers of a sheikh) facilitated such kinds of activities. One of the best well-known, although from other times, Sufi movement deeply involved in the worldly affairs was established by the charismatic Imam Shamil in the North Caucasus. Having trained his *murīds*, sheikh Shamil organized a strong resistance against Russian occupation and created his own state.

The Safavid order was transformed into a hierarchical, strong organization with a political agenda by the son of the Sheikh, Sadr al-Din (who headed the *ṭarīqa* from 1334 till 1391). Under his direction, the hierarchy of a *muršid* (teacher), who headed the organization, and khalifas who acted as his agents was established. All missionaries, assistants and students were under control (Lapidus, 2002, p. 258).

Secondly, Safaviyya sheikhs' moves were relatively flexible. The sheikhs were able to recognise the needs and respond to the diversified and constantly changing demands of the population. Thus, the transformation of the group's doctrine from Sufi Sunnism to Shiism shall be understood in relation to social preferences and balance of power. On the other hand, the religious doctrine itself was never rigid and complete. On the contrary, some of the *ṭarīqa*'s concepts had always more or less eclectic character; it employed elements from various religious and cultural traditions, e. g., from Christianity, Judaism, Shiism, Sunnism, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism. Again, such heterodoxy and eclecticism seem to be typical of the religious landscape of the 14th century.

The initial appeal to Sufi ideas was understandable because in the post-Mongolian times it was Sufism, not scholarly orthodox Islam represented by the ulama, that attained the highest status among various Islamic trends.[4] For average people not mosques but *pirs*, understood in Azerbaijan as sacred places, tombs of saint people or shrines, symbolised the Islamic religion (Yunusov, 2004, p. 65). In such an environment, sufi *ṭarīqas* flourished. During the 15th century many new brotherhoods emerged; their activities reflected the social realities and expectations. In Azerbaijan one of the most popular was the movement of the Hurufis, popularised by a famous Azeri poet Nasimi (1369 – 1417). Fadlallah Astarabadi (d. 1394), the founder of the Hurufiya, claimed to be the Hidden Imam. He preached a doctrine that the secret knowledge was within reach of those who mastered the understanding of the alphabet, for the partic-

4 This pattern relates not only to Southern Caucasus. Sufism enjoyed tremendous popularity among societies on the frontiers of Islamic empire: in North Africa, Central Asia, and India (Lapidus, 2002, p. 171).

ular letters represent elements of the microcosm of God's reality (Lapidus, 2002, p. 284).

Although the Sufi *ṭarīqas* enjoyed favourable conditions, some of them received additional support from the governors. The ruling dynasty of Aq Qoyunlu in their sphere of influence offered privileges in particular to Halvatiyya, Nakshbandiyya and Kubraviyya brotherhoods (Amoretti, 1986; Yunusov, 2004). It is also noteworthy that the popular and dynamic Halvatiyya movement similarly to Safaviyya changed its religious doctrine, however in this case in another direction: from Shiite towards Sunni affiliation.

Safavids' reference to Sufi ideas was not only convenient because of the popularity of this form of Islam. Another reason was the pragmatic implication of some Sufi values and norms. The high status of a Sufi sheikh and his unchallenged authority made it possible for leaders to shape the ethics and activities of *murīds*. Such relationships established between disciples and masters laid a foundation for social organization and, in some cases, turned Sufi concepts into considerable ideological force.

In the case of the Safavid movement, the most noticeable shift in religious ideology occurred during the process of expanding the movement's social base. The adoption of Shiite doctrine seems to have been a successful strategy in increasing the membership of the *ṭarīqa*. The breakthrough came with the recruitment of 32 Turkish tribes with Shiite preferences. Under Sheikh Junayd (d. 1460), who married into the clan of local princes, the Turks joined and supported the order. The distinguishing symbols were their caps with twelve purple stripes worn in order to honour the Twelve Imams. Due to that headdress, the new *murīds* got their common name—Qizilbash (literally "men with red caps") (Yunusov, 2004, p. 67; Lapidus, 2002, p. 285; Amoretti, 1986, pp. 629 – 634). With the help of new followers, the Safavid order got ready for military operations under the flag of religion. Serious support came from vast social strata of the peasantry and the city poor. Some local lords and aristocratic families also joined the movement to resist more powerful rulers. Among those groups the Shiite outlook had already been developed, although some religious or cultural elements may suggest a kind of Shiism grounded in the syncretic local influences, not accepted by mainstream Shiism.

Thus, the reason for the Safavid's change in religious affiliation in the 15th century may be a serious demand for Shia *ṭarīqas* that got stronger in the turbulent times. Three elements seem to be crucial in the rising popularity of Shiism: (1) a tradition of resistance to injustice and unfair leadership, which constitutes a founding and basic element of the Shia doctrine, (2) radicalism, and (3) symbolism of the Hidden Imam, called Mahdi. The history of struggle of the Shia minority against usurpers, seizing and holding power without legal rights or authority,

must have attracted positive feelings of masses oppressed by feudal lords or tribal chieftains. According to historical sources, all rebellions against Mongolian rule and their immediate successors used Shiite symbols (Yunusov, 2004, p. 66). Shiites had always been persecuted and suffered from clear injustice, but nevertheless retained faith. Their faith in future victory is epitomised in the figure of Mahdi, who was perceived as an anticipated just governor. Among the people of Iran in the 15th century there was a 'return' to the myth of the perfect sovereign, a 'true Caliph,' and consequently to a renewal of the hope in the advent of a leader (*ibidem*).

Politics and Religion under Safavid rule

Relations between religion and politics have various forms. We will focus on three of them that marked the Safavid era: the change in relations between the Shia "winners" and Sunni as well as Sufi "losers," the complex development of Shiite religious system, and the geopolitical situation.

Shah Ismail concentrated so much power in his hands that he was able to significantly dictate the rules for religious communities and their leaders. To justify his rights, he proclaimed that he was the Hidden Imam, or the descendant or even reincarnation of Ali, the Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law, the fourth caliph. Both temporal and permanent mystical leadership belonged exclusively to him. His military successes acted as proof of his closeness to God and supernatural abilities. On the basis of such religious claims, the Safavids did not tolerate any single sign of disobedience or hesitation. Questioning the authority was equal to apostasy (Lapidus, 2002, pp. 285–286).

The Safavids religious career had to be supported by some segments of the society. Their new empire was inhabited mainly by Sunnis, who constituted around two-thirds of the whole society. Unlike Shiites, people affiliated with Sunnism more often dwelled in cities. In spite of such distribution of religious preferences, Shah Ismail in his new mission attempted to create a society consolidated by one universal doctrine of *Ithnā ʿAsharī* Shiism. This decision was officially announced in Tabriz, then the capital of Azerbaijan, declared by the Shah the new capital of his Safavid empire. Ismail recited the *ḫuṭba* (public preaching) in the names of the Twelve Imams and cursed the first three caliphs (Abu Bakr, Omar, and Osman), rejecting the Sunni version of Islamic history. All mosques were obliged to add a phrase "Ali—the governor of Allah" to *namaz* (the Muslim prayer). Shiism became the official religion of the Safavid Empire. At the same time, Ismail's idea of being the Imam's reincarnation went beyond any Imamite concept of a leader.

Consolidation of the society began with a cruel elimination of non-Shia groups. Persecutions, murders, and mass executions were commonplace.[5] A lot of Sunni officials left Iran and moved to neighbouring Sunni countries. Also, Sufism, in spite of its significance in the origin and development of the Safavids, did not evade persecution. Even some Shiite *ṭarīqas* were repressed (among others, Nimatallahiyya and Nurbashiyya), because they were regarded as potential competitors or rivals. Another decision of the Shah that changed the religious situation was the mass deportation of the enemies of the state. Suspected Sunnis were deported deep into Iran, while Shiites were encouraged to settle in their place. Such policy affected many communities. For instance, Sunni inhabitants of some villages of Nakhchivan, who supported the Ottoman state, were deported to central areas of Iran. The reports of a traveller who visited Azerbaijan in the middle of the 17th century, Evliya Chelebi, paint a picture of a vibrant Shiite religiosity in the form of many more or less orthodox sects, and of exceptional piety among the population.

Apart from force and repression, the Safavids used also other strategies for Shiitization of the society. One of the most effective was the tax policy. Already in 1502, Shah Ismail granted tax privileges to some of the Shiite clergy. His eldest son and the successor of the Safavid dynasty, Shah Tahmasp (1524–1576), strengthened this trend by providing fiscal exemptions to the whole Shiite area. Charismatic reformer, Shah Abbas (1587–1629) went even further—paying taxes was obligatory for Sunnites, while Shiites were exempted from this duty. The trend of Shiitization was prevented only for some short periods when the Ottoman rivals were attacking Ismail's kingdom (Yunusov, 2004, pp. 69–73).

As a result of the Shah's policy, the division between various Islamic traditions, which had not been very sharp in the past centuries, became tangible. The diffusion of various religious practices and elements of doctrines was limited, and people were forced to adapt to the only acceptable creed and rituals of the Twelver Shiism. However, Sunnism did not disappear in Azerbaijan. According to some historical sources, Sunni communities managed to survive those hard times. The majority of Baku inhabitants were referred to as Sunnis. Moreover, in some traditional Sunni communities in Shirvan and northern regions, Sunnism was still dominant in the 17th century (Yunusov, 2004, pp. 74–75). The open preference of the state for the Shiite model lasted till the 18th century, when the Safavid state was seriously weakened, and some local feudal gover-

5 It is interesting to note that the policy of a religious war did not have a direct impact on non-Muslims. Christians, Jews, and even Indian pagans are mentioned among the groups which avoided mass killings at that bloody period (Yunusov, 2004, p. 78–79).

nors in Azerbaijan, mainly Sunnites, started to turn to the Ottomans for support. Generally, social tensions and conflicts between various denominations remained serious. To illustrate this point, it is enough to mention the activities of Nadir Shah (reigned 1736 – 1747), who endeavoured to reform religious policy. One of his first moves was putting an end to the existing Shia practice of cursing publicly the first three caliphs—the practice especially insulting to Sunnis. On the other hand, from Sunnis the Shah demanded that they recognise the Jafari *maḏhab* as equally valid as the four orthodox legal Sunni schools of law. His proposals were written down in the form of decrees, such as the "Decree about uniting two doctrines of Islam, Sunni and Shiite, the existence of which divides Persians and Turks" (Yunusov, 2004, pp. 81 – 82). Inspired by the geopolitical situation, his ecumenical attempts to unite Shiite and Sunni Islam were opposed by the orthodox Shia clergy as well as by the Sunnis. Both groups were suspicious of his intentions and responded negatively to religious reforms. In 1747 Nadir Shah was murdered in unknown circumstances.

The second consequence of the emergence of the theocratic state was a rapid development of religious ideology. The close relations between politics and religion bore fruit in the shape of a significant elaboration of a religious doctrine. The founder of the Safavid Empire wished to enhance his position with the help of religious legitimacy. Similarly, to other Shiite rulers, the Safavids supported the development of *falsafa* (philosophy; a mixture of positive sciences with logic and metaphysics), as well as a Shiite version of esotericism and cosmology. The patronage also resulted in the progress in the studies of Shiite sharia, specifically in the investigation of the Jafari *maḏhab*'s legal problems. In most Azerbaijani cities intensive religious, cultural and scientific life focused around Islamic schools, especially madrasas. Schools in Tabriz and Ardebil were considered the best in the Safavid empire. The theological and philosophical studies developed mainly from the Shiite perspective. There were attempts at introducing new or less orthodox ideas and concepts, but scholars pursuing such research risked persecution.

The third significant consequence of the alliance between state and religion, or rather of the appropriation of religion by the shah, was the long-lasting separation of Shia and Sunni countries. For Azerbaijan, it meant also a cut-off from the Turkic culture and language. Wars between countries belonging to different branches of one religion, Safavid Iran and Ottoman Turkey, resembled the situation in Europe, where at that time, plenty of people were killed in the long struggles between various Christian denominations.

Chapter 3
Islamic Modernism and Secularism

3.1 The Emergence of a "Modern" Understanding of Islam

Since the initial period of Islamization, the main trend in the religious history was the persistent strengthening of Islamic position. Apart from a sheer military power, Muslim leaders used to incorporate or adapt some of Islamic rituals and elements of doctrines to the local cultures. Such strategy proved to be successful and Islamic groups and sects gradually managed to increase their numbers, membership and support. Other characteristic feature was the continuous pluralism of the Islamic religious scene. Since the very beginning the appearance of Islam on the lands of Azerbaijan was marked by the activities of various Islamic branches. Sunnites appeared naturally as the majority of Muslims, Shiites—as refugees escaping from persecutions immediately after the political discontent over the succession controversy, which followed the death of Muhammad in 632. Finally, Sufi brotherhoods were established and gained popularity with the influx of Turkic and Mongolian tribes, which had been Islamised mainly by the Sufi masters. This pattern of a pluralism, offering numerous possibilities to the local population, was drastically changed with the introduction of a monopoly in the religious sphere in the beginning of the 16th century. Shah Ismail's decision to make a particular model of Islam, Twelver Islam, the dominant religious tradition had restricted people's choices in religious affiliation.

Azerbaijani cultural and religious identity was vastly transformed during the era of Russian rule.[1] The new approach to religion, formed in the course of the XIX and beginning of XX century, was revolutionary and had far-reaching consequences. It was a rupture with the past and an attempt to form a "modern" Muslim society, led by religious principles, but principles redefined to a large extent. It was also an endeavour to break up with Iran and its long-lasting influences on peoples' religious and social worldviews.

1 The Russian supremacy over Azerbaijan began in the first quarter of the 19th century. With the exception of a short democratic episode (1918–1920), it lasted till the end of the Soviet era in 1991. More precisely, only part of Azerbaijan was taken by the Russians. The Turkmenchay Treaty from 1828 confirmed the division of the Azerbaijani lands between Russian and Persian empires. At present the part that fell under Persian rule belongs all the time to Iran, and is sometimes referred to as Iranian Azerbaijan.

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The Russian "patronage" introduced new traditions and ideas which influenced the way Muslim elites thought of their societies and religion. The loss of sovereignty made Muslim intellectuals rethink their position in the world. It made them realize the urgent need to undertake radical reforms in education, economy, social organization, customs and religion. The impact, direct and indirect, of Russian colonialism, reinforced during the Soviet era, is noticeable even today in the reformist, modernist and secular forms of Azeri Muslims' engagements with the state and Islam.

The modernization of Islam refers to particular concepts of the reformist movements in Islam that appeared in the 19th century as a consequence of the encounter with Europe and the Enlightenment ideas. Such movements emerged at the same time in many parts of the Muslim world. In many cases, they were part of liberation movements and protests against European colonialism. The calls for reformation reflected the need to reformulate Islamic ideals and to conduct social reforms among Muslim societies in the light of a vivid confrontation with Western civilization and its political ideas. The debates that swept the Muslim world led to numerous constructive propositions of social, educational and religious reforms. Muslim reformers searched for those elements of European models that might be useful in modernizing their societies, such as technology, educational system, press, the economy. Modernization, however, was to be achieved without losing the Islamic identity. Islam was to become a modernizing force, open to the world and its challenges. Islamic tradition was redefined and widened to encompass the ideas of socio-cultural revolution.

Jadidism—Modernist Reform Movement

In the Russian sphere of influence, this intellectual ferment expressed itself in the reform movement of Muslim intellectuals widely known as *Jadidism*, inspired by the publications and activities of Ismail Gasprinsky (1851–1914) from Crimea. His ideas spread among Tatars, Bashkirs and other Muslim communities of the Volga and Ural regions through Gasprinsky's newspaper "Tarjiman" ("Translator"), his textbooks and programs. Education was chosen as one of the most powerful tools of social reforms. The model of a progressive "new-method" school quickly gained popularity throughout Russia and Central Asia. The graduates, acquainted with European culture and science, formed the new generation of Muslim intellectuals, eager to engage themselves in reforming society and the public sphere.

In the religious context, this movement led to a redefinition of Islamic identity. Islam became a legitimizing force in the struggle with the past. The Jadids

were looking into the Koran and hadiths to prove their ideology of progress. In this process, Islam was engaged with the social reality and everyday life of people. Modernists tried to persuade people that Islam is not only about reciting the holy verses, but also about changing the world, according to the religious principles. They also showed Muslims under Russian rule that there is a global community of believers. Inhabitants of Khiva, Tashkent, and Bukhara came into contact with Iran, the Ottoman world and other Muslim regions. Such a dynamic milieu and a flow of ideas often lead to creativity and social change.

Research on the phenomenon of *jadidism* has only recently gained wider popularity. It was mostly due to Adeeb Khalid and his ground-breaking book "The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform. Jadidism in Central Asia (1998)." Using various sources, among others Uzbek and Tajik, and many archival materials, Khalid analyses the socio-cultural debates and search for modern identity among Central Asian Muslim elites in a very comprehensive way. Besides the new model of education, Khalid points to the progress in communication technologies to explain the extent of jadids' impact. The press, the telegraph and the railway opened Central Asia, the periphery of Islam, to the worldwide Muslim umma. In this process, a new public sphere was created, which changed the criteria for entering the social stratum of elites (*ibidem*, chapter 4). However, even though Khalid perceives similarities in the Muslim project of modernization, he warns against imagining *jadidism* as a unified, coherent movement that spread from the Crimea to Central Asia and its regions (*ibidem*, p. 8–9). Local realities, with their distinct histories, political situation, cultural traits, shape the strategies of social actors, in this case, the Muslim progressive elites. The ideology of change and modernization was adapted to the particular needs and situation of the communities.

The first generations of Azerbaijani modern elites, inspired by Russian culture, networked with Muslim Tatars and Central Asian Muslims in the collaboration on reform projects. However, it was not until 1905 that *jadidist* ideas made an impact of the socio-cultural life of Azeri people (Lemercier-Quelquejey, 1984, p. 54). In 1905 the first school for Muslim girls was opened. It was funded by an Azeri reformer, Haji Zeynolabedin Tagiyev, who made a fortune during the first oil boom. He was a representative of a new bourgeoisie, the social class that cooperated with the Azeri intelligentsia in the project of social modernization. The inspirations for egalitarian approach to education came from Europe as well as the Volga Tatars' experience. The religious justification was found in the Koran, on the basis of chosen passages.

In spite of the engagement, according to some scholars (e.g., Goyushov, 2008), the impact of *jadidism* on Azerbaijani Muslims was not as strong as on Sunni Muslim societies of the Volga region and Central Asia. In Shiite legal sys-

tems, the use of *iğtihād* (independent reasoning) was never so restricted as in Sunni interpretations, therefore new (*ğadid*) methods of Koranic exegesis proposed by *Jadidists* had relatively little value for Azerbaijani Muslim scholars.

Modernization of Azerbaijani Islam took its own, distinctive way, grounded in the local context. Ideas of the Azeri intelligentsia were more radical than the proposals of Sunni leaders. The reformist agenda in Azerbaijan focused on the ideological struggle with elements of Shia "folk Islam." The term folk was used as an antonym of "pure," and denoted all kinds of cultural innovations in the sphere of Islamic religion that could not be justified on the basis of the Islamic scriptures, mainly the Koran and hadiths. Some elements of Shia ritual life came under attack, especially the *Muḥarram* commemorative tradition dedicated to the tragedy at Karbala. The practice of self-mortification and public street processions were regarded as unjustified in Islam. The well-known modernists, such as Mirza F. Akhundov, called for rejecting that elements of Shia tradition. This line of criticism is still alive at the beginning of the 21st century, and among its supporters is the current *sheikh-ul-islam* ("the leader of Islam") Allahshukur Pashazade.

The criticism of Shiite pietistic rituals had also another root—the existing tensions between Shiites and Sunnites. Sunni intellectuals and reformers underlined the social and political aspects of Shia religious holidays. Especially the commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn often ended in a confrontation between the two Islamic schools. For that reason, the ecumenical reformers protested against some forms of Shia expressions.

There were, nonetheless, certain features shared by both *Jadidists* and Azerbaijani Muslim modernists. One of the most important was the issue of education. Modern schools with adequate curriculum were supposed to replace traditional system of Islamic maktabas and madrasas, where education was in Arabic and Persian. The youth educated in European institutions, being under great impression of what they saw as European progress, propagated the spread of secular sciences in their societies. Representatives of Azerbaijani new stratum of intellectuals called for far-going reforms in education, including the separation of schools from the influence of religion. This modernization and secularization attempts were met with a strong opposition from the traditionalist Muslim elite, who identified itself with Iranian values and worldviews.

Apart from the Jadidist movement and Russian cultural influence, there is a third distinguishable point of reference for Azerbaijani modernists, namely pan-Islamism. It was adopted by the Sunni segment of the Azerbaijani elite that had connections with the Ottoman Empire, where this ideology was developed. Having completed their education in Sunni Ottoman centres, the Azerbaijani elite undertook actions for modernization of Islamic culture and institutions. Again,

the main focus of the struggle was on the educational system. Additionally, Sunnis, who at that time had already lost their dominant position among groups in Islam in that region, advocated the end of divisions and conflicts inside Islam, which, according to some observers, such as Russian orientalist K.N. Smirnov, turned out to be relatively successful (Yunusov, 2004, p. 123). Similar strategy can be observed among Sunni Muslim communities in contemporary Azerbaijan.

Pan-Islamic ideology was at the beginning deeply related to Pan-Turkism, which also found fertile ground in Azerbaijan. Ali-bey Huseyn-zade (1864–1941), one of the first Azeri protagonist of Pan-Turkism, stressed three values that are worth fighting for: Turkization (understood mainly as an introduction of Turkic languages to schools), Islamization, and Europeization. These slogans underwent a small transformation and eventually they expressed the following issues: Turkish, Islam and modernism, symbolised subsequently by the three colors of the flag of Azerbaijan (Yunusov, 2004, p. 126). Pan-Turkism provided a strong impulse to the development of the secular tradition, which emphasises ethnicity and Turkic roots instead of religious aspects of identity.

Finally, modernism also had a political episode. In order to put the new ideas into life, modernists established an Islamist *Ittihad* (union) party. However, in the light of a decrease in social support, they were forced to concede their leadership in the parliament to the coalition of secular parties with nationalist and liberal agendas. The winners fought with the rule of the sharia and religious courts, proposing instead an establishment of secular institutions and a secular legal system. In other Muslim societies of Central Asia and Caucasus religious influence over judicial system lasted longer, until the late 1920s.

3.2 Secularization

The roots of secular outlook among Azeri Muslims can be traced to the encounter with European culture, imported to Azerbaijan in a Russian form. Furthermore, the ideology of Turkish nationalism is vital in our understanding of that phenomenon. Both trends generally led to a decrease of the role of religion in public life. Pan-Turkism became the dominant trend of Azerbaijani political life during the first decade of the 20th century. For new Azeri elites that constructive ideology of the unity with Turkic people on the basis of ethnicity, culture, and language was very appealing. The most spectacular realization of secular values was the establishment of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic—the first independent republic in the Muslim world. For Azeris it is a source of national pride.

Early manifestations of secularism can be seen in the attempts at placing the religious sphere under strict control. Russian officials, who distrusted Muslims

more than Christians, pursued the policy of co-opting representatives of Muslim religious figures to subsequently use them to control the Muslim society. After the conquest of the Caucasus by Russians, in 1823 in Tiflis (Tbilisi) the position of *sheikh-ul-islam* was established by Russian officials. This highest religious structure was headed by Muhammed Ali Husejnzade, who was an ethnic Azeri. His appointment was not recognized by the Shiites nor Sunnites. The duties of *sheikh-ul-islam* encompassed issuing certificates to *akhunds* (*akhūnd*, in Azerbaijan, a Muslim cleric that can be appointed the head of a mosque) and mullas. Shiite clerics were forbidden to send youth for religious education to Persia, and those with Persian certificates were not entitled to work in Azerbaijan (Yunusov, 2004, pp. 89 – 90, 95). In Azerbaijan, the Board, known as the Spiritual Board of the Transcaucasian Muslims, was created in 1872 by the decree of Alexander II; it exits still today but under a slightly different name—the Caucasus Muslim Board. Shiites were headed by a *sheikh-ul-islam*, whereas Sunnis by a *muftī*. The ideas of the state's control over religion had already been in use towards the Russian Orthodox Church. The main role was the spread of control over local religious functionaries and over all aspects of religious life. The power of the Boards was gradually reduced and replaced by the power of the secular state and its leaders. Another function of the Council was the indirect regulation of the Islamic market. According to the law, a religious official could not have been a member of any "illegal associations" nor a "follower of the prohibited teachings," the terms referring to Sufi brotherhoods, which at that time were famous for their anti-Russian sentiments and activities (Rohoziński, 2005).

The indirect consequence of secular control over the religious field was the systematic gathering of data concerning religion. Statistical information on religious affiliation, taking into account the division between Sunni and Shiite Islam, has remarkable value for researchers, although the data should be treated with caution. For instance, they referred only to the male section of the society. Sometimes, untrue numbers of family members were given to the officials in order to avoid high tax or military service, obligatory for young men. Later censuses, conducted during Soviet times and afterwards, do not contain religious data.[2] Here, let us only briefly refer to the ratio of Sunnis and Shiites, as it relates to the topic. According to the first census, giving exact information on religion in particular regions of Azerbaijan, there were overall two times more Sunni Muslims than Shia. The religious distribution in Azerbaijan was as follows: the northern territories (Sheki, Kuba, Shirvan, Kazakh and Djaro-Belokan) were generally Sunni, while the central and southern religions were inhabited mostly by Shiites.

2 A review of these censuses can be found in Yunusov (2004, pp. 100 – 112).

In 1848, the Azerbaijani population was divided equally between those two branches. From the next census in 1886, interesting information comes about activities of the Shiite sect *ʿalī ʾilāhi* in Azerbaijan, with the centre in Dashkesan. Generally, religious trends in the 19th century, shaped by wars, migration, and Russian policies, were directed towards the change in the religious situation. The trend towards Shiitisation of the society was reinforced again by the influx of Iranian workers looking for work in the booming oil industry. As a result, in 1917 Shiites outnumbered Sunnis and became the dominant group (Yunusov, 2004, pp. 106–108). Most probably, although currently there are no exact data on this issue, the domination of Shiism has remained unchallenged till present and, according to cautious estimations Shiites continue to make 65 percent of the Muslim population, whereas the rest, around 35 percent is Sunni.

Secular tradition was indeed a new and unique ideological option for the Azerbaijani society in the end of the 19th and early 20th century. It was shaped by the Azerbaijani elites as an alternative to religion, and the most characteristic of its features was radical anti-clericalism. The secular outlook was developed in the encounter with the ideas of Russian enlightened absolutism, which stood in sharp contrast with traditionalism of Muslim societies. Russian culture also turned out to be more inspiring to the emerging nationalist elites than the scholastic culture of Shiite Islam. New secular intelligentsia quickly succeeded in gaining support of the masses and in diminishing the influence of the Shiite religious establishment.[3] The success of secularists was so evident that they managed to take over the leadership positions. It enabled them to carry out reforms, which further decreased the position of religious institutions. One of the most significant was the organizational reform of the Muslim Spiritual Board. Azerbaijani secularists combined two Boards that represented two parts of the Muslim community: Shiite and Sunni. The outcome of that move was an increase in the level of control the state had over religion. Religious doctrines and practices were no longer independent of the needs of the state. Such moves, reinforced by the political climate of the communist era, made the secular tradition the most influential in Azerbaijani society, although challenged at present by Islamic revivalist movements.

Currently, secular attitude to Islam is still very strong. However, the most common understanding of secular values does not stand in contrast with Islamic identity. Secularism in contemporary Azerbaijan is not interpreted as a synonym of anti-religiousness, which was a dream of some communist activists and lead-

3 For a detailed and nuanced view on the cooperation of some part of Azeri elite with the Russian see Mostashari (2006.

ers. This concept signifies a basic knowledge in religion, a decrease in the level of influence that religious professionals and organizations have in the public life. Roles of the clergy, in this perspective, are limited; instead of providing a general guidance to the faithful, religious leaders are widely expected to provide some basic religious services, such as weddings, funerals, and prayers. People who identify themselves with this ideological perspective in many cases perceive themselves as Muslims. However, the term "Muslim" is understood by them largely as an ethnic marker, not as a synonym of a regularly practicing person fulfilling or trying to fulfil religious duties. Such an understanding of Muslimness existed already in the early 20th century, as noted by a representative of the pre-Bolshevik Azerbaijani intelligentsia (Goyushov, 2008), and continues to be a prominent approach among contemporary Azerbaijani Muslims. Although the combination of "secular" and "Muslims" may seem contradictory, it points to the particular pattern of self-identified Muslims, who uphold some religious practices and some kind of religious beliefs (even though it is not usually possible to refer them to mainstream Islam), but altogether religion does not occupy a significant place in their daily lives. The majority of secular Muslims never set foot in a mosque, even during Ramadan or Kurban Bayram. But from time to time they engage in religious practices of various kinds and hold some religious beliefs. This topic will be raised later.

To sum up, secularism in the Caucasus and Central Asia means a predominantly ethnic understanding of "being a Muslim" with limited religious engagement. In many cases, it includes two aspects: anti-clericalism (indicated not only by a contemptuous attitude towards the class of official clergy, but also by the lack of trust in the official religious leaders) and the "privatization of religion." The latter refers to a perception that religion's functions should be limited to the religious sphere. In other words, religion shall not interfere with politics, nor with any other sphere of public life. Its realm is confined to the narrow private section of individual lives and should not be exposed too strong to the public view. Ethnographers have observed the shift of religious rituals into private spaces and an increase in women's engagement in religious matters, a process Tamara Dragadze (1993) called "domestication" of religion in the Soviet Union.

Finally, during the Tsarist rule the Orthodox Christian church gained some popularity among Muslims. Its influence was possible due to the active support of Russian state authorities. The process of Christianization of the Caucasian peoples began with the strengthening of the religious infrastructure. New churches were built and a significant number of mosques were passed over to Christian believers. Another Russian strategy involved some settlement actions of Christians on Muslim lands. Religious propaganda was also encouraged. The data available from the Russian statistical sources from the 19th and early

20th centuries show how the religious market was changed. It is evident that the Christian niche gradually managed to take over a significant part of the market. According to the results of the first census from the 1830s, around eighty percent of males inhabiting the territory of modern Azerbaijan were Muslims. In 1886, Muslims made up only 74 percent of the population (Yunusov, 2004, pp. 104–107). One of the long-lasting effects of such policies, reinforced by the years of atheism, is still visible in the symbolic structures of contemporary Muslims in Azerbaijan. It is not uncommon to meet Muslim people in Orthodox churches. Many Azerbaijani Muslims underline similarities of Islam and Christianity and express respect towards Orthodox saints.

3.3 Soviet Influences

Secular and modernist traditions were strongly reinforced during Soviet times.[4] On one hand, anti-religious campaigns struggled with Islamic leaders and painted them as an old-fashioned and backward group, belonging to the past. They were treated as a synonym of regress, which did not fit well with the communist projects of building a new, "rational" world, where science was to play the major role. Communists worked hard on replacing religious rituals with socialist rites and ceremonies, but with limited success. On the other hand, during more liberal periods, communist strategy consisted in co-opting Islamic clergy to make them serve the communist ideology and tasks. In both cases, religious leaders lost much of their authority. Such a trend was in line with anti-clerical efforts of some members of Azerbaijani reformist intelligentsia.

For communists, the main obstacle was not religion itself, but its mobilizing functions that might potentially contribute to the weakening of the Soviet Union. Therefore, the struggle focused on the outward manifestations of Islamic religion. Public functions of religion were restrained by law. The decree about separation of the state and schools from religion became one of the main Soviet tools referring to religious policy. Such an attitude enabled the privatised religion to flourish. The religious sphere became clearly separated from other spheres of social life, even though Islamic scriptures underline the wholeness of religion and forbid such divisions. The Muslim Spiritual Board re-established in 1944 supervised the implementation of this policy. Its basic task was defined as organizing and controlling the religious sphere. All mosques were forced to register at

4 More on the topic of Soviet policies in regard to Islam in Azerbaijan can be found in Bedford (2009), Grant (2009), Rohoziński (2005), Saroyan (1997), Świętochowski (2006).

the Board and had to follow instructions regarding, e. g., the content of preaching. Board's officials had to take control of mosques and prevent them from engaging in any kind of non-religious activity. Under Soviet legislation social services were forbidden, as well as educational or commercial activities. The restrictions upon economic activities affected the material base of religious institutions. Not only were they prohibited from doing any kind of business, but also from having their own property (Saroyan, 1997, p. 45 – 46; Yunusov, 2004, p. 134).

Secular tradition gained additional impulse from the events that were taking place in neighbouring Turkey. In 1924 the caliphate came to an end and was replaced by a secular state hostile to religion and its symbols. As in the Soviet Union, the new Turkish state, under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881 – 1938) and his followers, set out anti-religious actions and propaganda. Another similarity was the establishment of instruments of control in the form of religious boards. In Turkey, the Board on Religion and Religious Organizations was created in 1924. The Arabic alphabet was changed to Latin. Suddenly, the ideology of pan-Islamism lost its main supporter and was replaced by nationalist ideologies. Finally, in 1928 religion became legally separated from the state.

The loss of religion's impact on social life intertwined with the gradual loss of religious knowledge among population. Azerbaijani Muslims under Soviet power were cut off from the centres of Islam. For decades their religious culture was functioning in relative isolation from the Islamic world. Official leaders, cooperating with the communist state, lost their authority among average people. This pattern remained unchanged even a decade after the fall of the Soviet Union. Moreover, some forms of Islamic practice, described in the literature as belonging to "parallel," "alternative" or "popular" Islam, were all the time vivid, but limited in scope to a purely religious sphere.[5]

Indeed, the "popular" forms of Islamic religion enabled the expressions of religiosity in those repressive times. Islamic rituals were surrounded by a mixture of Islamic and non-Islamic beliefs and convictions. Faith in miracles and magic was quite common. One of the most popular religious practice was *ziyārat* to a shrine, usually called *pir*, but also *mazar*, *imam-zade* (Shia) or *ojaq* (Sunni) (see Bennigsen & Wimbush, 1985, p. 126). The word *pir* comes from Persian and means

5 The dichotomy between "official" Islam of registered mosques and their staff on the one side, and the "unofficial", "alternative" Islam with underground, private religious rituals on the other has already been criticised by numerous authors, e. g., by DeWesse (2002); Rasanayagam (2006b); Saroyan (1997a, 1997c), as cited in Rasanayagam (2011, p. 90). This approach simplifies the social reality, and as Rasanayagam claims, ,,the dichotomy (...) is produced within the Soviet regulatory framework itself rather than being an expression of differing theological interpretations or beliefs" (*ibidem*, p. 91).

"saint" or an old person. In Azerbaijan people did not make a linguistic distinction between the *pir* as a saint or an elder person and the *pir* as a sacred space. Many *pirs* were known as the burial sites of special people, but another meaning of this word referred to a distinctive natural feature of nature, such as a mountain, tree, rock, waterfall (Saroyan, 1997, p. 106). *Imam-zade* means a "descendant of an Imam," which has a direct link with the Shia *Ithnā ʿAsharī* tradition. The last word *ojaq* is translated literally as a "hearth," which reveals its links with Zoroastrianism. There is an Azerbaijani folk saying: "Whenever one sees a dome, one thinks it's a shrine of an imam" (Saroyan, 1997). The guardians of this tradition were relatives, usually descendants, of Shia imams or other famous *sayyids*. This part of the religious sphere was to a large extent outside state's control. In spite of it, unlike Soviet Muslim Boards in Central Asia and Northern Caucasus, the Board located in Baku never issued any fatwa that condemned the cult of *pirs* and saints. That exception was probably based on the prevalence of the Shiite tradition, which puts great emphasis on the respect towards Imams (Rohoziński, 2005, p. 287) and saint people in general.

The complexity of the Islamic situation under communism is well illustrated by a surprising career of a *pir* that started functioning in the 1950s. The shrine of Mir Movsum Aga (1883 – 1950), a person renowned for his miraculous abilities, was erected in a village of Shuvalan, around 40 kilometres from Baku, soon after his death. There are testimonies that the anti-religious campaigns did not prevent people from worshiping even the new "saints." Soon the shrine became the most important place of popular Islam and, as I have witnessed, has retained its enormous popularity till present days. Movsum Aga and the legends of his wonderful capabilities are widely known in the capital also among non-practicing Muslims.

The lack of knowledge in religious matters had numerous consequences. The lack of knowledge implied the lack of orthodoxy, which had far-reaching consequences for the Sunni-Shia relationship. Quite surprisingly, the communists, and in a way the Turkish secular ideologists, contributed to a progress in the old pan-Islamic dream of unity between Sunnis and Shias. This trend gradually intensified, and, in effect, the differences became so negligible that the majority of Muslim population could no longer say whether they belong to the first or the other group. It was only with the rapid rise of the revivalist movements and the spread of missionary activities in Azerbaijan in the 1990s that the consciousness of the traditional divisions in Islamic religion regained significance.

The modernist or reformist tradition was carried on during the years of communism. In its development three kinds of actors played crucial roles. First of all —the atheistic state, whose officials fought with various forms of religious expressions. Secondly—Islamic clergy that collaborated with the Soviets in the

framework of the official religious institution of the Muslim Board and through mosques, whose staff had to follow the rules imposed on them. And thirdly—some Azerbaijani intellectuals, who continued the project from the 19th-century of endeavours to modernise Islamic religion and society. Among key themes undertaken by modernists were: the "backwardness" of mullas, the "barbarity" of public ceremonies and processions honouring Shiite martyrs during the *ʿĀšūrāʾ*, and the general "impurity" of lived Islam of the masses.[6]

The struggle for a pure version of religion, which many scientists, including Mark Saroyan (1997, p. 44), call a fundamentalist orientation, and we will call the reformist Scriptural tradition, consists in efforts to change people's religiousness and norms in society. Scriptural will mean placing the Scriptures of Islam (the Koran and the hadiths) in the centre of interest for Muslims. It implies that all inspirations and legitimization, at least in the theoretical discourse, should be derived from the words of Allah and Prophet Muhammad, as they were recorded in the holy books. Mark Saroyan, who studied Soviet Islamic organizations, argues that the Muslim Religious Boards were in the forefront of purification movements.[7]

At the same time, clerical activities attempted to integrate the concept of "pure" Islam with the communist ideology and social and economic reforms that were carried out in the communist system. Merging Islam with communism resulted in some innovations, such as the reinterpretation of the form and content of Islamic culture. This process took the shape of a campaign, which was characterised in both Soviet and Western scientific literature as Islamic modernization. The changes were instituted not only in the doctrinal sphere, but also in rituals. Muslims were advised to observe Ramadan fasting but not "full time," as orthodox Islam demands. This change was justified by the fact that the month of Ramadan often fell during the harvest time, which threatened the economic targets of the Soviet system. The ritual ablution performed by Muslims before praying gained new justification. No longer was it just a religious demand, but primarily a hygienic issue. Also, *namaz* was promoted as a way of ensuring a healthy life; formal body movements of the Muslim prayer, such as bowing and prostrations, were to be treated as a kind of sport activities (Saroyan, 1997, pp. 60 – 69).

6 The concept of ,,lived religion" characterises the religion of the people. It refers not so much to the Koranic concepts or orthodox legal tradition, but to actual beliefs and practices in Muslim societies, which exhibit extraordinary variances across the world.

7 The Muslims Religious Board for the Transcaucasus in Baku was only one of four such institutions in the USSR. Other Boards were located in Tashkent, Makhachkala, and in Ufa.

The Shiite *ʿĀšūrāʾ* was also one of the first targets of the Soviets, who saw in this holiday the most expressive form of religion. However, instead of attacking this tradition from an anti-religious point of view, as it could be expected, communists acted in a different way. They introduced an anti-*ʿĀšūrāʾ* campaign with slogans of eliminating superstitions from the Muslim religion and making it "pure" (Goyushov, 2008). Again, some actions of the state and of Muslim leaders supported each other and overlapped in their scope.

The opinion that *Muḥarram* rituals were in contradiction to the sharia, and, for some people, to good manners, contributed to the fact the controversies over that holiday lasted for many years. Two groups of religious experts took part in the struggle over this tradition: the Azerbaijani ulama and mullas. Ulama were interested in "cleansing" the mourning over imam Husayn from all non-Islamic, popular, "wild and pagan" elements (Brunner, 2009, p. 130). A government joined this struggle and eventually in 1923 it launched a campaign aiming at prohibiting theses ceremonies and especially public processions.

The problems of a fight with pious Shiite ritual are well-depicted in the conversation the author of the *Azerbaijan Diary: A Rogue Reporter's Adventures in an Oil-Rich, War-Torn, Post-Soviet Republic* (1998), Thomas Goltz, had with an *akhund* of a Juma Mesjid in Mashtagah (a settlement in Baku):

> Learning how to pray in secret was one thing, I thought, but learning self-mortification at the end of a steel whip from Iranian tutors was something else. Delicately, I broached the subject. His answer was strange. "The gratuitous shedding of blood is anathema in proper Islam," Haji Asadullah said. "But however wrong, the *Taziyah* ("renewal" of the suffering of Husayn) has become a part of our cultural tradition—and it would be very difficult for us, the leaders of the newly liberated religious community to begin forbidding aspects of expression that we disagree with so shortly after having censorship lifted on our own beliefs (Goltz, 1998).

Even though the ulama were hostile to this element of, as they called it, cultural tradition, they did not lead direct attacks on people performing those rituals. For Islamic scholars, not only the reform of Islam was crucial but also the support of the believers. They were acutely aware of the crucial and delicate power relations.

Another feature that distinguishes Azerbaijani Muslims from Muslims of other parts of the Caucasus and Central Asia is the status of Sufism during the Soviet era. This Islamic tradition used to be very strong among Muslim societies of North and South Caucasus, as well as in Central Asian Muslim republics with plenty of Sufi brotherhoods and Sufi sheikhs. Even sources from the 19th century confirm their vitality. Sufi expression of Islam managed to survive during communism mainly in Chechnya and Dagestan. There are scholars who suggest

that the same happened in Azerbaijan and regard the cult of saints and holy sites as a proof of Sufi influences in the region. Benningsen and Wimbush (1985), for instance, argue that the Nakshbandi Sufi networks are active among Azeri Muslims, especially in northern parts of the country. In pilgrimages to local Sunni shrines they saw a sign of organized *murīds*' activities (Bennigsen & Wimbush, 1985, p. 127). This interpretation of Islam has been criticised by Mark Saroyan (1997), who examined numerous sources of knowledge on Islam in the Soviet Union used by Western scholars. Since access to empirical data was limited for most of them, they had to rely on secondary sources, mostly on Soviet materials. Although this itself is not an unusual approach, the problem lies in their interpretation of the original texts. In order to "discover" the truth about Islam behind the Iron Curtain, Benningsen and Wimbush, for example, transformed the Soviet data and read them uncritically. In the Soviet attack on the masses of pilgrims who actively visited the *pirs*, they found proof of Sufi activism. The general absence of Sufi *murīds* is also characteristic of the present situation in Azerbaijan. Those Sufi sheikhs who remained active carry on their activities underground, as I have been told by people related to Sufism.

Chapter 4
The Lived Islam

Most publications about contemporary Islam focus on Islamism, jihadism and other radical ideologies associated with this religion. There are plenty of coverages of Al-Qaida network and its leaders, analysing all imaginable aspects of this phenomenon. The second decade of the twenty first century brought into mass attention the so-called "Islamic State" fighting in the Middle Eastern countries. Since 2001, numerous scholars of Central Asia and the Caucasus trace the roots and developments of Islamic (neo-)fundamentalism or militant Islam and propose various scenarios for its future. Radical organizations, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, Hizb at-Tahrir al-Islami, and the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan have been under constant scrutiny (see, e. g. Khalid, 2007; Naumkin, 2005; Rashid, 2002; Zapaśnik, 2006). Certainly, these problems are crucial from the perspective of geopolitics, security and international relations, but it must be remembered that radical Muslims are only a minority. The focus on fundamentalist groups creates an impression in the West that Islam in Central Asia basically equals to radicalism. Another, partially overlapping perspective on Islam, concentrates on the so-called Islamic revival and its dynamics. The "born-again" Muslims are also in the spotlight nowadays, and that was my basic research topic when I began my fieldwork among Muslims in some post-socialist countries. I was fascinated by the sudden, as it seemed to me then, return of religion into the public sphere. However, in Azerbaijan I realized quite quickly that by taking such an approach, I would neglect a large area of mainstream Islam and everyday practices of average Muslims. I will get to know new religious movements and their leaders, but this will give me a picture of a relatively small part of the social reality in contemporary post-Soviet countries. This is the situation social sciences know very well—the colorful and vivid processes attract lots of attention and are widely discussed. The less spectacular landscape of the multiplicity of different everyday activities of the masses are quite often ignored. This "silent majority" is unrepresented in the academic and public debates on Islam (Akbarzadeh, 2011). Only recently the termed of "lived religion" has made its way to the research on institutionalized religions, such as Judaism, Christianity or Islam. With this concept we can grasp the complex and varied practices and ideas of people that do not fit into the framework of orthodoxy, as it is defined by appropriate religious canon. Instead of assuming someone's religious horizons by extrapolating the formal organization's ideology, we can gain more insight from an openness to "unorthodox" norms and beliefs. Apart from asking survey questions, we shall be open to the believers' own narratives

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and heterogeneous cases which do not follow the most assumed patterns (McGuire, 2008; Ammerman, 2012). Formerly a key concept in understanding religious beliefs and practices in "primitive societies," nowadays the term "lived religion" is being increasingly used in the study of Catholics, Hindus, Jews and other believers of institutionalized religion. Similarly, if we want to understand contemporary Islam in its most common forms and meanings, we should take a closer look at the phenomenon of "cultural Muslims." Although it can be found in most Muslim communities, in Central Asia and the Caucasus it undoubtedly prevails over other understandings of Islam.

Another reason for exploring the "lived," mainstream Islam is to establish a useful perspective to better analyse the religious renaissance. The growing groups of pious, "active" believers do not operate in void. They do not simply copy the patterns of religiosity from other, more Islamized societies, but adapt them to their culture. Those pious Muslims are attached in many ways to their society, their relatives, colleagues, friends, employers. They negotiate their religious identity and the meanings of being a Muslim through interactions with others, mainly with "cultural Muslims." In Baku one can see a veiled woman who goes hand in hand in with a friend in a tight, short dress with vivid make-up. After over twenty years of religious revival, such couples do not attract much attention. People seem to get used to it, and woman in headscarves and men with a small "Muslim beard" are part of the cultural milieu. This process of adaptation involves everybody, and thus even the universal, global religious trends, such as Salafism or the Gülen Movement, have their local, unique features.

The process of religious revival takes place in a largely dynamic context. There is a large degree of uncertainty and a lack of security. The first decade of political transformation after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the re-emergence of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia as independent republics were full of troubles and constant threat. In the North Caucasus wars with Russia destabilized the region, led to radicalization and violence. The conflict over the Nagorno-Karabakh between Azerbaijan and Armenia began during the glasnost and perestroika of the 1980s and developed into a war which claimed thousands of lives in both sides and the massive forced migrations of people. After the war, the ethnic landscape of both states was drastically changed. Now Armenia is almost completely homogeneous in terms of ethnicity, in Azerbaijan the ethnic diversity is only a little higher. Nagorno-Karabakh is now occupied mainly by Armenians but it is claimed by Azerbaijan. The 1994 ceasefire is not accepted as a durable solution and the conflict is now regarded as "frozen," but the propaganda on both sides keeps the society prepared for the perspective of new war over the disputed region. Media regularly give accounts of clashes between armed

forces near the border zone. In Azerbaijan, the problem of Karabakh is presented in almost all daily news on TV and in newspapers. The atmosphere of fear and uncertainty over the future developments is widely felt. The unresolved conflict has also a profound impact of the internally displaced persons (IDPs). According to government of Azerbaijan in the end of 2013 there were 609,029 IDPs who were forced to leave their homes in Nagorno-Karabakh and in the surrounding territories. More than twenty years after the ceasefire they live in Azerbaijan, and around half of the population dwell in the Absheron Peninsula which hosts Baku and its satellite cities and villages (UN, 2015). Internal economic and political situation is also complicated. The rapid introduction of capitalist economy affected lots of people who were not able to find their place in the new working environment. The security of employment guaranteed by the former socialist system collapsed and unemployment appeared as a serious social problem. Salaries in the public sector were low and for many people everyday life became challenging.

In the market model, demand for religion (and a particular form of religion) is not stable. The uncertainty may also be the reason why lots of people take refuge in religion. If we accept the proposition that religion offers mostly the assurance of life after death (Ekelund, Hébert, Tollison, 2006) than the choice of faith in times of turmoil becomes understandable. If this world includes troubles and struggle with everyday hardships, then it is reassuring to know that life after death would bring solace and happiness. In the terms of the economics of religion:

> The premise that the core element of the demand for religion is assurances of salvation means that the market for religion operates in some respects like the market for insurance. In insurance markets higher levels of uncertainty increase the demand for insurance (Ekelund, Hébert, Tollison, 2006, p. 50).

The last two decades in Azerbaijan, and in other post-socialist states, the level of uncertainty is relatively high. It was even higher in the period when the Soviet Union was collapsing and no one knew what would become of it. Wars and violent ethnic conflicts followed and there were many government changes. Religion was an even more attractive point of reference and the "demand for insurance" was higher. More risk makes people more inclined to affiliate with a religious group or institution. Or, more precisely, less risk tolerance influences the demand for religion. Risk tolerance, although being an individual characteristic, depends upon many external factors. The perception of risk is linked to stability of government, the level of education, the status of science, "survivability conditions," and many other things (Ekelund, Hébert, Tollison, 2006, p. 58).

Another possible explanation for the religious revival, which can be treated as complementary, is in the fluid nature of the boundary between ethnic/national, cultural and religious identities. In the societies where religion is closely tied to national culture, change in nationalistic sentiments may be responsible for the observable rise in religiosity. The end of the Soviet state, which imposed upon its citizens the transnational socialist ideology, brought everywhere the resurgence of national feelings. Symbolic boundaries between ethnic and national communities got stronger and manifested themselves in a variety of ways. Russian language was losing its status and was replaced with national languages. Systems of education have changed and promoted national interests. National culture was presented as unique and especially as separate from the neighbours. Russia and Armenia are dominated by Christians, so Azerbaijan often underlines Islam as a part of national identity.

The topics of fluidity and negotiations of identity are however too vast and complex to explore in this book. In the anthropological literature of the Soviet-bloc societies there are some important research on the shifts in ethnic, national, cultural and religious ethnicities under the influences of socialist ideologies and state practices. The topic of interaction of “two cultures” of socialism and religion was a popular research topic. Many ethnographers of the Soviet part of Eurasia claimed that many aspects of the lived religion have strong national features, and the topic of religious and ethnic/national identity remains today as one of the main research area in the anthropology (Rogers, 2005).

The topic of religion is too vast to cover all nuances and aspects. Bearing in mind how complex the issue of religion and identity is, I deliberately limited the research to a more specific and under-explored topic—the role religious competition plays in religious revival. As the field research was in progress, I realized that there is an aspect of intersection of religion and ethnicity—which is itself very interesting—the “cultural Muslims” phenomenon. Although it was not my initial aim to explore it, understanding the identity ambivalences of post-Soviet Islam became crucial to better grasp the nature of religious revival and intra-religious competition.

4.1 “Cultural Muslims”

The etiquettes of “cultural Muslims” or “ethnic Muslims” are commonly used across Eurasia to identify and describe those who identify themselves as Muslims but do not treat Islam as a spiritual compass to guide their everyday lives. These terms are commonly used particularly by those Muslims who became actively and consciously engaged in religious life in the last two decades. In a

way typical of religious converts, they underline the symbolic boundary that exists between them—"religious Muslims"—and the rest of the society that participate in Muslim rituals only insofar as they are part of a communal tradition. In many personal stories I have heard, practicing Muslims were saying that they were brought up in Muslim families and thus they regarded themselves as Muslims since their childhood. The Muslim identity was a natural one. It gave individuals a sense of belonging to family circles and to their communities, which in the Caucasus plays a very important role. However, in the complex historical processes outlined in the previous chapters, the term "Muslim" acquired distinctive meanings. Being Muslim means belonging to a Muslim society, different from Russians, Armenians, Georgians. It is an identity that links them to other Muslim nations and gives a sense of brotherhood with Turks, Arabs, Pakistanis and others. Before the Russian conquest of the 19th century, in Central Asia and the Caucasus being a Muslim meant first of all belonging to a collective, to a group that drew a symbolic boundary between them—Muslims and others. It had little relation to the theological complexities or to the knowledge of Islamic sources in the original, Arabic language (Khalid, 2007).

A Muslim identity implies also following local traditions, some of which have a religious aspect, others—not necessarily. Azeris tend to explain some of their social habits and patterns of behaviors by referring to Islam as the source of their culture. As a result, Muslim identity cannot be seen as a purely religious one. The Islamic mythology mixes with local stories and narratives. Although, as I will stress later, religion is an important part of the Azeri worldview, the way religion is understood and practiced is far from understandings observed in the "core" of Islamic civilization, particularly in Arab countries.

In Central Asia Islam has always coexisted with other elements of the religious mosaic. Although it appeared in the Asian steppes already in the early eighth century, nomadic people were for almost ten forthcoming centuries reluctant to accept the Islamic faith. In such circumstances, according to many scholars and observers, Islamic identity was more superficial and more open to other religious traditions, such as Zoroastrianism, Shamanism, Manicheism or paganism. Although the faith in supernatural powers prevailed, it was not coupled with the knowledge of Islamic credo nor with Muslim practices, such as five time daily prayers or ablutions (Levshin, 1832, p. 52–54; Rowe, 2007, p. 141–142). Thus, the concept of "cultural Muslims" is also often used to describe the complex social identity in the post-Soviet republics of Central Asia as well as in other post-communist countries, such as the countries of former Yugoslavia (although in this case the term "ethnic Muslims" is more popular). The term "ethnic Muslims" was so popular that it was even included in a population census held in Yugoslavia in 1961 to let the Muslims distinguish themselves from Cath-

olic Croats and mainly Orthodox Serbs (Brunner, 2009). Religion is only one of the layers of Muslim identity and it is does not play a significant role in everyday choices, behaviors, plans. It exists as a part of a general worldview, which leaves some space for the sacred. It is also incorporated in several rituals and ceremonies, which are treated as a part of tradition. Nevertheless, on the whole, religion, in this concept, is a private and individualized matter.

It is vital to point to the voices of criticism related to this concept. Johan Rasanayagam, for instance, argues that speaking of cultural identity versus religious one does not correspond to the social reality. These concepts "imply that 'culture' and 'religion' are discrete categories, the former being an unreflective immersion in tradition, whereas the latter is a matter of self-conscious, considered belief (2010: 90)." But this is what happens in the post-Soviet context—those Muslims who have become active and engage in religious rituals are much more conscious of Islam, its duties, obligations, norms and most of all of "orthodox" ways of performing Islamic activities (prayer, ablution, hajj, etc.) As I will show later, the issue of defining the "proper" Muslim conduct is in the centre of debates in the whole Islamic world, and in the post-Soviet region it is particularly striking because of the contrast between the current "religious revival" and the communist times. The contemporary competition between various Islamic branches and sects is, among others, about the model of orthodoxy that will guide Muslims in the future. In this process, those who take the path of active religious participation, have more "self-conscious, considered belief" than the rest of the society. What's more, the precarious relationship between the "new-born" Muslims, as I would say, and the majority of "ethnic Muslims" put the former group in a difficult position. They are expected to prove their choice at every step and in every situation.

However, if I understand it correctly, Rasanayagam's concerns are more about the reflexivity of people. He questions the sharp division between culture and religion. To some extent, it is true, as it is impossible to categorize all kinds of behaviors and social norms as either cultural or religious. Even the case of wearing a headscarf is problematic. It is usually discussed in the context of religious Muslims, but there are exceptions. In 2008, I was in Georgia in the Pankisi Gorge spending some time among the Kist community, which has Chechen roots. Although there are few Christian Kists, the majority identifies themselves with Sunni Islam, or at least with Islam in general without being able to specify their particular branch. Teenage girls from the Gorge were dressed in the usual fashion, as most of Georgian Christian girls. On first glance, one could not tell that they were Muslims. They lead a typical, village life, often in poverty, as unemployment among Kists is generally very high. Most of the girls identify themselves with the Islamic tradition, but as some of them told me, they treat explicit

and systematic religious practices as belonging to the oldest generation. This division of responsibilities is seen as traditional. Indeed, religious rituals are performed by their grandmothers, who gather on their weekly *zikr* sessions, silent or loud, depending on the community they belong to. For teenagers that is a part of their tradition that religious celebrations belong to the elderly. On the other hand, headscarves that some of the women over 60 wear, are treated as a part of the dress code at a certain age, not as a visual mark of their religious identification. Older women are expected to wear a kind of head cover, but it is a type of cover that also Christian Georgian older women wear. A typical garment of a certain age in Georgia and elsewhere in the Caucasus. This example shows that—to a certain extent—Rasanayagam's argument is right. Culture and religion overlap, often to a large extent. Religious attitudes of Kists teenagers are not well-thought and conscious. They are shaped by the community and often in an unconscious way. This is a pattern that most children simply follow, observing kin and neighbours in various occasions. They occasionally visit sacred places (often of a mixed Muslim-Christian character)[1] with their parents and I do not believe they make a sharp division between cultural and religious tradition. But on the other hand, the term "cultural Muslims" is really useful in comparing Kist traditional spiritual life, their eclectic practices formed in the multi-ethnic communities, with the new wave of "born-again Muslims" that appeared in the Pankisi Gorge in the 1990s. The "Wahhabis," as the local community calls them, arrived at the Pankisi villages with the Chechen refugees escaping the Northern Caucasus, which was devastated by the Chechen wars (1994 – 96 and 1999 – 2009). For the Wahhabis, the Georgian unorthodox Muslims are merely "cultural Muslims." The reformists' endeavour to purify the Kists' religion of all cultural but non-Islamic traditions, such as the practice of *ziyārat*, Sufi-like *zikr* rituals and other heterogeneous elements (Wiktor-Mach, 2009).

How does "cultural Islam" manifest itself in contemporary Azerbaijan? The first striking observation is that after seven decades of communist rule, atheism is hardly present in this country. An average Azeri Muslims believes in God and seems to have no doubts regarding the existence of spiritual life. The very few atheists I have met were members of urban intelligentsia. Many more atheists live in neighbouring Russia. Indeed, religious consciousness did not perish in the Soviet era. It found its soil in a variety of places, usually out of a mosque and madrasa, which had almost totally been damaged by communists. In this transformation, not only the forms, but also the content of religious beliefs

1 More on the complex spiritual life of the Kist community can be found in e. g., Kurtsikidze, Chikovani (2008, pp. 248 – 250).

and knowledge changed significantly. Cultural Muslims can be characterized principally by irregular, and rather rare religious engagement with mosque or religious readings. Its main features are a general belief in God, observation of some religious rites, and a lack of knowledge about religious basic tenets. At the same time, their worldview contains religious aspects and images.

Religious holidays are widely observed but, as religious leaders claim, they are mostly celebrated in a superficial way. Some of them—Eid al-Adha (Festival of the Sacrifice), which is known in Azeri as Kurban Bayram, were so popular that even the Soviets did not manage to eradicate it. This holiday falls on the 10th day of the month known in the Islamic tradition as Dul al-Hijjah. It is the month of the hajj, when Muslim pilgrims flock to Mecca in their thousands. People who can afford are expected to sacrifice animals according to Muslim rules. Nowadays in Azerbaijan, as well as in Turkey, it is also a secular holiday, which in practice means a chance for free days and a chance to spend some more time with relatives, neighbours and friends. Students in Baku who come from various smaller cities or villages usually can’t wait for holidays to be back at home. Most of the holiday non-practicing Muslims spend on preparing food, inviting guests or paying Bayram visits. They treat Kurban Bayram as a set of rituals without paying attention to the religious or philosophical significance. A common theme is the slaughtering of sheep. Islamic activists organize educational campaigns to appeal to people to, at least, help the poor and marginalized people on this occasion. Ilgar Ibrahimoglu (2009) points to Western Europe where more charitable activities are organized during the holiday than in Azerbaijan. In Brussels, he witnessed how the local Muslim community reminds all its members to support the poor. Islamic institutions and shops have special Gurban Bayram posters with educational aims. He wishes that similar activities take part in his own country, as an average level of religious awareness is low. The mass media only add to this superficiality, as they do no show religious holidays in their traditional context. The mainstream news is short, they attest to the event, but do not invite people to reflect upon the significance of religious aspects.

Socialization into a Muslim society

Even though my research focused mainly on pious traditions constituting the contemporary Islamic revival, the fact that the majority of Azerbaijanis follow, to a greater or lesser extent, this approach to religion enabled me to observe secular Muslims in their daily lives. I happened to share an apartment in Baku with two students (I will them call Hafiza and Sughra) who were representing this tra-

dition and became my first informants. When I asked about their religion, when we first met, both girls did not hesitate to say that they were obviously Muslims and that their religion was Islam.

The girls have been socialized into this tradition since their childhood during some collective religious rituals, which were underlined by Durkheim and his followers as the main mechanisms for inter-generational transmission of tradition. Their parent neither attend mosques nor make *namaz* but they continue to observe ritual rites that were popular already during communist time. Islamic celebration of funerals and circumcision of boys (*sunnat*) are almost universal among ethnic Muslims. Once I visited my colleague's family and was told that her four-year-old nephew had just been circumcised and would have his *sunnat* ceremony, known as *svad'ba* (wedding), in a few weeks. The boy's parents deliberately postponed the *sunnat* until he grew up a little, so that he could remember this important event for the rest of his life. The operation was carried out under anaesthetic in a hospital. My colleague, the only one in this family who wears hijab, explained that the act of circumcising is a Jewish and Muslim religious rite. Afterwards, I discussed with the girls this ritual. Sughra shouted that she had witnessed her younger brother being circumcised, and, deeply moved by her memories, she began to tell me about it. This boy had his *sunnat* when he was one year old. In this case no mulla nor any other Islamic figure was present, and Sughra did not link this event to Islam; for her it was just a national custom. A special doctor was invited and performed the surgery at home. All the family gathered around and watched. The child received no anaesthetic, and the injury hurt for a few days. For Hafiza the story was so shocking that, for the first time, she said she was happy to be a girl.

Apart from religious rituals, Muslim socialization is focused on morality. Older generations seek to preserve the established system of social norms and values. Ethical principles passed on to children in families and schools are presented as "traditional," "Islamic," or, increasingly, as an element of national culture. In practice, these cultural and religious roots of morality largely overlap with each other and it seems impossible to separate them into discrete categories. It can be illustrated by gender relations and the concept of *namus* (honour). This multidimensional term, often associated with women's virginity before marriage and modesty in behavior and dress, is widespread in the Muslim umma. As Nayereh Tohidi (2000) notes, in Shia Azerbaijan as well in Shia Iran it's one of main men's responsibility to protect the namus of women in their clans. Any behavior that may raise suspicion towards a woman's "purity" brings shame also on her male closest relatives. The higher a clan has position in society the more it is afraid of "scars" on its reputation. This deep-rooted cultural norm that guides relations between sexes is strongly internalized by teenage girls

Table 4.1 11 Least Religious Countries. Source: Crabtree, Pelham (2009).

Is religion an important part of your daily life?	
Country	Yes (%)
Estonia	14
Sweden	17
Denmark	18
Norway	20
Czech Republic	21
Azerbaijan	21
Hong Kong	22
Japan	25
France	25
Mongolia	27
Belarus	27

and boys. In Tohidi's research on gender issues among Azeris, that was a recurrent topic raised by her respondents. They admitted that the cult of honour was the most crucial aspect in their early upbringing. This norm regulating men and women mutual relationships is a vital element of a social structure that favours patriarchalism in families. Tohidi (2000: 27) cites an Azeri saying: "A man to a household is like a gem to a ring." Many Azeri girls accept it as a part of their tradition, and some claim that such norms stem from the Islamic religion. Nonetheless, similar patterns are observed in other parts of the Caucasus. In Georgia they were evident among Christians and the Muslim minority of Chechen origin. They are also widespread in Armenia. Ethnographers tend to explain it in terms of clan system and patriarchal rules. Religion may strengthen this concept, but nevertheless it is not unique to Islam.

4.2 Secularized Muslims

For the vast majority of Muslims of the post-communist region secular state and society is a norm to which they are well adapted. It is evident from everyday observation as well as from social surveys. According to a Gallup poll from 2009 (Table 4.1), Azerbaijan is one of the top eleven least religious countries in the

world, after Estonia, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and equally with the Czech Republic.[2] Thus, this post-Soviet state turns out to be the most secular in the whole Muslim world and thus has been called the "bridgehead of secularism" (Shaffer, 2002). This fact makes Azerbaijan even more interesting for everybody interested in the changes in religious trends. It is a living laboratory for social scientists. The secular outlook and lifestyle enjoy great popularity among Azeris and only 21% of the them considers religion to be important in their daily affairs. The same survey for Egypt, for example, shows that religiosity matters to most citizens, at least in subjective terms.

For most Muslims in contemporary Azerbaijan Islam plays only a limited role in their everyday life. As in Central Asia, people who follow this tradition regard it as a part of national heritage and culture. Therefore, the term "Muslim" refers to a variety of practices, some of which contradict orthodox Islamic teachings. Their engagement with religious institutions is relatively rare. Data collected by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) shed more light on the details of socio-religious phenomena in a wider context of transformation. CRRC consists of research networks which has been conducting nationally representative surveys in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan since 2004. At the beginning they were known as the "Data Initiative," and then since 2010 as "Caucasus Barometer." Data they collect enable researchers to analyse various aspects of recent trends and developments in the sphere of politics, social moods, economic activities and the "lived religion." One of the questions on religious matters asked to people refers to the subjective significance of religion. Here the possible scope of answers was wider than in the case of Gallup's poll. There were four options to choose: (1) "Not at all important," (2) "Not very important," (3) "Rather important," (4) "Very important." In the whole Caucasus this question was posed only to people who had chosen a religious identity (Muslim, Christian, Jewish, etc.). In the case of Azerbaijan, it was the vast majority, so the distribution of answers is rather representative for the population. With the wider set of options, the issue of religious engagement is much more nuanced. According to the 2010 data, Muslims, for whom religion is very important indeed constitute a minority, slightly over one fourth of the population. This seems to confirm the Gallup's findings. However, there is a significant group of Azerbaijani Muslims that regard religion as "rather important" in their lives (43%). That is a lot and this group needs a closer attention in the future. Then, for 22% religion is "less important," but not "unimportant at all." These both groups, who are neither too

2 More on the methodological controversies with surveys of religiosity in the Muslim context can be found in Wiktor-Mach (2012).

Table 4.2 Importance Azeris attach to religion. Source: CRRC, "Caucasus Barometer" (2012)

How important is religion in your daily life?	
People who regard religion as very important	33 %
People who regard religion as rather important	47 %
People who regard religion as less important	16 %
People who do not regard religion as important	2 %
People whose answers was "do not know"	1 %

engaged nor too indifferent, are those Muslims who do not (yet?) follow the new religious movements and religious preachers, but lead a life in which religion is from time to time interwoven with daily affairs. Table 4.2 shows the results of the same survey conducted only two years later. The rise in subjective religiosity is evident. Religion has become more and more important, it is more publicly debated. This trend of an increase in religious identification is making Azerbaijan more similar to the other Caucasian states. As the CRRC reports (2013), in Georgia and in Armenia, both Christian countries, self-declared religiosity is much higher than in Azerbaijan, but the figures are constant. No significant change in religiosity among those mostly Christian countries has been noticed between 2010 and 2012. Azerbaijan seems to be catching up with them.

Religious Attendance

Although religiosity is a dynamic process, the general trend of secular attitudes among Azeri Muslims is still dominant. It is evident from the level of religious attendance. Azerbaijani mosques are generally empty. Apart from Fridays and religious holidays, it's uncommon to spot more than a few or a dozen believers praying inside. Praying times are obeyed by a silent minority. It's a striking contrast to, for instance, Arab countries. The high level of religious attendance in Azerbaijan does not imply religious engagement with religious institutions.

Only a handful of Azeris acknowledged that they practice religion on a regular, weekly or daily, basis. CRRC asks a question "Apart from special occasions such as weddings and funerals, about how often do you attend religious services nowadays?" According to the 2011 data, which are presented in Table 4.3 only 4% of respondents gave an answer: "once a week or more often." A little more, but still a minority, said that they practice religion in public institutions at least once a month. An average Azeri Muslim goes to mosques and shrines only occasionally, predominantly during Islamic holidays.

Table 4.3 Attendance of religious services, 2011. Source: CRRC, "Religiosity in South Caucasus" (2013)

How often do you attend religious services nowadays?	
Once a week or more often	4 %
At least once a month	10 %
Only on special holidays	30 %
Never	26 %

Survey data collected by the CRRC show also the extent of secularization another interesting point. Survey findings summarized in Table 4.4, which describe religious practices, show ambiguity in the patterns of religiosity. It turned out that even if people obey some of the basic orthodox religious requirements they do not necessarily fulfil other duties. Let us focus on one activity—visiting holy places. As the data indicate, fewer people admit to attending mosques on a regular basis than to praying or fasting. So, if we relied only on this one indicator of religiosity, we could conclude that the level of religious engagement is indeed very low. Is Azerbaijan, in that respect, similar to Western countries such as France, Germany, the Netherlands or Switzerland, as the data from World Values Survey show? Some comments are necessary here. First of all, religious practices should not unconditionally be compared with one another. In orthodox Islam there are five duties—the so-called Five Pillars of Islam—that are said to be obligatory for believing Muslims. Apart from confessing their faith (*shahada*), and making a pilgrimage (*hajj*), Muslims are required to observe ritual fasting (*sawm*), to give alms to the poor (*zakat*), and to perform ritual prayer (known as *salat* or *namaz*).

Unlike in Christianity, attending religious ceremonies at formal institutions is not so much underlined in Islam. Visiting mosques for prayer is not a duty of a religious Muslim—*salat* must be performed at a convenient place five times per day (according to Sunni tradition) or three (in Shiite tradition). Mosque prayer is only recommended by imams and other Muslim clerics, who refer to the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad to come to mosque as often as possible and to gather there especially for the Friday communal prayer. However, this recommendation is valid only for grown-up men; women and children are generally neither encouraged to nor discouraged from taking part in Friday ceremonies. This factor can partially account for the low level of religious attendance. An exception—important in our case—is the current political activity in Azerbaijan against the most active Sunni communities, which has resulted in the closing of some of the most popular mosques in the capital and elsewhere. For Salafi

Table 4.4 The percentage of people in Azerbaijan following religious practices. The data are classified according to the frequency of a given practice. Source: Data Initiative CRRC (2007 – 2008).

How often do you attend holy places?	
Every day	5.0 %
More than once a week	2.3 %
Once a week	3.5 %
At least once a month	7.0 %
Only on special holidays	35.6 %
Less often	19.8 %
Never	26.9 %
How often do you fast?	
Always	15.2 %
Often	9.0 %
Sometimes	23.2 %
Rarely	20.8 %
Never	31.2 %
Fasting is not required by my religion	0.6 %
How often do you pray?	
More than once a week	16.9 %
Once a week	1.5 %
At least once a month	4.9 %
Only on special holidays or less often	51.6 %
Never	25.2 %

Muslims, the few Sunni mosques in Baku are too small to accommodate everybody. For that reason, women are now directly discouraged from attending. At the Lezghi mosque in the Old City the women's section has been taken over by men.

Another crucial issue in the whole post-Soviet context is the phenomenon known as the privatization of religion. It is rooted in the context of the atheistic communist era, when an open struggle with religious institutions and religious expression took place. For that reason, religion "went underground." States' campaigns against Islam have made a huge impact on some social groups. They still continue to carry out religious rituals as they used to do in the past, when the number of mosques was extremely limited and visiting them was strongly discouraged. The communists did not manage to eradicate religious sentiments, but, as a result of their actions, fasting, praying and performing religious rites, such as circumcision and weddings, were often held secret.

Force of habit is not the only factor accounting for low mosque attendance. The secular context of the state is at least equally important. According to the law, Azerbaijan is a secular country, where religion is separated from the state. Many regulations function in a way that makes fulfilling some religious duties quite tough. Friday, the day of the main Muslim public prayers, is a working day. Some of my informants from Baku admitted that they would like to participate in the mid-day Juma Prayer (*juma* in Arabic means Friday), but they have to be at work at that time. Praying is also surrounded by obstacles, as Islamic law puts the emphasis on formal aspects. Islamic prayer, highly regulated by jurisprudence, consists of several ritualistic words and formal body movements. Not all companies or workplaces have a special room for that purpose, and even if there is one, work obligations don't always allow a person to pray at specific times.

Finally, care should be taken with terms characterizing religious practices. Devon et al. (2011) in the paper "Measuring Religiosity/Spirituality in Diverse Religious Groups: A Consideration of Methods," described the preliminary phase of his research among Christian, Jewish and Muslim students. That part of the project consisted in the evaluation of survey questions by experts and leaders of those three religions. One of the improvements that followed was the replacement of the word "church" by "synagogue" or "mosque" when Jews or Muslims were questioned. If a word used in the survey to describe religious activities was ambiguous or false for believers, research results would be unreliable.

Let us examine the surveys from Azerbaijan. In the CRRC's study from 2007–2008 (Table 4.4) the question was asked in a very general way: "How often do you attend holy places?" The same version of the question, but most probably in different languages, was asked of Georgians and Armenians, who are mainly Christians. In the Azerbaijani context, "holy place" has at least two distinct meanings: a mosque or a *pir* (a shrine of a saint or a sacred place; an equivalent to *mazar* in Central Asia). How do respondents understand the question? Do people who visit *pirs* count such "pilgrimages" as being at a "holy place"? The tradition of paying special respect to *sayyids* (holy people, great religious scholars or relatives of the Imams) is still very popular among people in Central Asia and the Caucasus. This phenomenon of "folk" forms of Islam is typical of non-Arab countries, where Islamic religion mixed with local culture and earlier, often pagan religions and local social networks. Folk Islam, including pilgrimages to *sayyids*' tombs, alternative healing practices, the use of magical objects, is nowadays quite widespread. Even in Baku, the cosmopolitan, vibrant capital city, the site of the Islamic University and the Azeri *ulama*, it is not uncommon to see some practices of this kind.

Fasting is more common in Azerbaijan than in Georgia or Armenia. But still more than a half of the Muslim majority society does not follow this requirement or does it rarely. The same with praying. Over 50 % of Muslims say they pray only on special occasions, e. g., during religious holidays or funerals. Additionally, one fourth of the population does not pray at all (Table 4.4). Thus, there are more people who consider themselves attached to religion, say that religion is somehow important for them than people who are active in performing religious formal duties. Rituals are less common than faith, so on the basis of pure observation of religious attendance it is hard to describe religious revival in all aspects. Religiosity in the post-Soviet context is a dynamic phenomenon and subject to constant reinterpretations. It has many faces—beliefs, mosques attendance and performance of religious duties, but also less formal, focused around shrines and its traditions.

4.3 Religiosity of the Shrines

Secularization is not a synonym to irreligiousness or atheism. Across the Caucasus and Central Asia, shrines are among the most visible signs of religiosity. For many centuries, in changing political contexts, they served as a primary site for spiritual experience. Veneration of saints' tombs is a ritual that has been popular in various areas of the umma. It is practiced by Muslims of Morocco, Central and Southeast Asia, Indonesia and in many other places. In the Caucasus the tradition of worshipping sacred places used to be, we could say, quite ecumenical. It was not uncommon to find Muslims and Christians praying together at the tomb of a local saint, as it was quite natural to hear from Muslims that occasionally they visit Orthodox churches to pray.

Hafiza visits *pirs* from time to time. The practice of *ziyārat* to the tombs of great scholars, poets, saints or descendants of the Shia imams remains a highly popular practice in Azerbaijan. During communism, such public display of religiosity was officially discouraged, but people did not stop visiting those sanctuaries.

In scholarly literature, such forms of religious engagement are often referred to as "folk Islam," or "popular Islam." There is some sense in it; those terms convey some meaning of this type of religiosity—religiosity based on spiritual experience, centred around saints, shrines, legends, sometimes magic. But, for the people who visit *pirs*, mosques are not seen as a separate realm. Mosques are not classified as the venues of "official" or "orthodox" Islam. In the public perception, there is no such distinction. Praying at the tombs of the saints is as much a religious activity as praying at mosques. It's more a question of family

or local tradition and preferences. This differentiation is not valid even for the Islamic clerics in Azerbaijan, who accept the complex reality to some extent. They do confront some elements of "non-orthodox" Islam, such as the bloody rituals of *ʿĀšūrāʾ*. But in their vision of what is acceptable in Islam there is a place for *ziyārat*.

Hafiza admires the shrine of Mir Movsum Aga[3] in Shuvalan on the outskirts of Baku, which she has already visited five times during the last two years. An impressive mausoleum has recently been built there, and it attracts hundreds of people every day. She explained her reasons for visiting that place:

> When I am at the *pir*, close to the tomb of this saint man, I feel exceptionally well. It is a kind of blessing to my soul. But also my wishes come true. When you ask the saint for help, you should promise him something, a traditional or special reward, and then to come back.

People often bring money, usually a manat or a few. Hafiza is against this practice. She suspects that people who serve at the shrine take the money for themselves. That's why last time she brought with her two kilograms of sweets. The gifts people leave at the shrine are supposed to be given to the poor. When she left the sweets in the *pir*, she was given a halvah, which has to be taken even though it is usually served at funerals.

The cult of saints is not officially sanctioned in Islam, but there is a tradition that assigns some people special status as the "friends of God." *Walī* is a person who acquires special qualities, capacities and exceptional powers due to his closeness with God. He is thought to have a more intimate relationship with God and to be more in a position to ask Him for help. Even after the saint's death, his extraordinary capabilities serve people. *Baraka*, God's grace and blessings, can be bestowed on those who made a visit at a Walī's tomb.

Mir Movsum Aga is a renowned miracle worker, probably the most prominent saint figure of the Absheron Peninsula. Everybody I asked for famous *pirs* pointed to his tomb. Hafiza's aunt, who admires saint people very much, told me the popular legend about this man's life. There is a legend of a young, mute boy at the age of six, who was brought to Mir Movsum to be cured. The saint ordered to fill a glass with water and passed it to the boy. "Drink it," Mir Movsum said and when the child finished, the saint asked him: "What shall you say when you get a drink?" The boy answered, "Thank you," and that were his first words. There is also another anecdote about a miracle from the Soviet times about a finance minister's wife who was cured at the

3 He is also called "At Aga," which literally means "flesh man" because of his illness resulting from lack of calcium in his bones (Alakbarli, 2004).

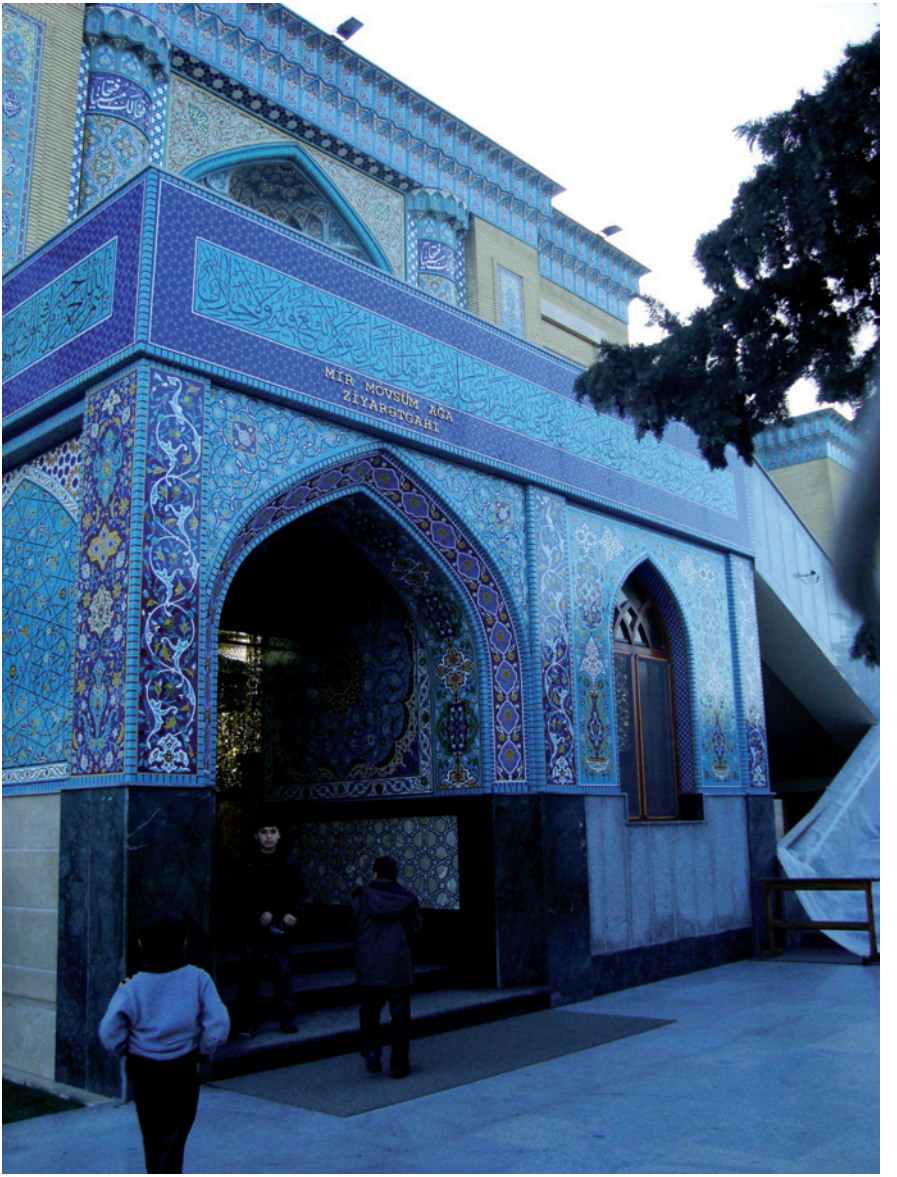

Figure 4.1 The *pir* of Mir Movsum Aga

saint's tomb after doctors in Moscow had been unable to help her (Kotecha, 2006).

I visited this *pir* accompanied by Julia, a woman of 35 from Baku. Sitting in a bus, which was taking us to the village of Shuvalan, Julia was telling me about Mir Movsum. She said that one has to express his wish at the tomb. What kind of dreams can be realized by the saint? I asked. "Everybody has his private wishes: better health for himself or for relatives, more money, a child," the woman answered. She is divorced and does not have a child, what in that society puts her under a very strong social pressure. As a single woman, she will never reach the same social status in her country as a mother does. The individualist model of an emancipated woman who develops her career, looks after herself and enjoys life with all opportunities it offers has not reached the Caucasus and Central Asia. The degree of interdependence among people is greater than in the West. Moreover, she does not work and has not own financial security. It was the third time that she was visiting this *pir*, believing it is the only way to change her life. Besides she has also been several times to Mir Movsum's house (transformed into a place of prayer) and to the tomb of Imamzade in Ganja. She repeated the rule which I had heard from Hafiza—it is not enough just to ask a saint for something. One has to promise Mir Movsum that, after a dream has come true, the person would come back and give him what has been promised. "It can be 10 kg of sweets or 10 – 15 manats; one can give more or less depending on his means," she explained. It was Thursday, a working day. Inside the *pir*, covered with mirrors, there were around 30 people walking in circles around the tomb of the saint and his relatives—*sayyids* (as Julia explained to me, not knowing how to translate this word into Russian). There was a continuous movement; people were entering and leaving the shrine. I was told that real crowds are on Sunday. Once inside a *pir*, one has to follow some unwritten rules. Everyone moves anti-clockwise round the tomb three times in a queue. When we reached the decorated bars surrounding the grave, Julia touched and kissed them. Then, turning her face towards the centre she was whispering prayers (in her own words, as she told me later), and expressing her wishes. Other people were also saying prayers in silence, slightly moving their lips. They touched the bars all the time and kissed it from time to time. The majority of "pilgrims" were women, but there were a few men as well.

In *pirs*, as in mosques, it is forbidden to walk in shoes. Women need to have their heads covered; there are headscarves hanging at the entrance. This kind of cover does not resemble a modern hijab, which is worn all the time when a woman is in a public place. Headscarves worn by women at the *pir* do not hide their hair, as hijab requires. In the corner of the room there is a box where people throw money. However, some people cast manats directly into the tomb when they walk round it. From the central place of the *pir* there is an entrance to a small mosque. On that day several woman were praying.

Again, I noticed how different it was from what I experienced at other mosques. Two older women were sitting on the carpet and prayed. Their prayer did not resemble an "orthodox" *namaz*, which defines every movement of the body in detail. The women that were doing proper *namaz* did it in a Shia way (e. g., Shiites keep their arms down, whereas Sunnis cross them). At the wall there were small prayer rugs, headscarves, and small pebbles for the Shia way of performing *namaz*, called *muhur*. On the opposite site, there were a few copies of the Koran. Women who had finished praying approached the Holy Books and touched them with their hands and kissed them.

Mir Movsum Aga's house also attracts people. Although no sign directs people to this place, which is hidden in the Baku Old City, almost everybody knows where it is. Women pilgrims predominate, but some men pray too, as I have witnessed. The majority of women wear headscarves in a fashion similar rather to that observed in Orthodox churches than to the hijab popular among "new Muslims." In a small room, pilgrims move in a queue towards the saint's portrait, where they pray for a while, slightly touching a face with both hands, as if they were cleaning it. To leave the room one has to stay directed towards Mir Movsum's image and to put some money in a special box.

Similar practices I have witnessed in Ganja at a tomb of Imamzade, where a descendant of a Shia Imam is buried. Next to the tomb, in the same building there is a separate room—a kind of mosque. When I entered it, there were only women sitting on the carpet and praying. Their postures and gestures did not resemble official *namaz* positions. It was striking to me how much they were similar to the style of prayer I witnessed among Chechen Muslim women in Pankisi valley in Georgia gathered in a room that belonged to Sheikh Effendi, who taught Islam in that region several decades ago.

The Imamzade *pir* is regarded by Shia Muslims as one of the most important in Azerbaijan. Local people claim it to be the holiest Muslim place after Mecca and Medina. Huge crowds appear at the *pir* during Shiite celebrations of *ʿĀšūrā'*. According to my host, who guided me to this place, all surrounding streets are packed with cars on that particular day. People come from all over Azerbaijan and even from abroad and often sleep in tents.

The ritual aspects of Muslim religiosity, exemplified by *ziyārat*, are mixed with spiritual beliefs. For Hafiza and Sughra, who represent the "cultural Muslims," Islamic religion means, first of all, faith in God and life after death. Even though their Islamic knowledge is rather basic, they are aware of some religious concepts, mostly of the Shia tradition. In their everyday life the most visible is the emphasis they place on morality. A lot of moral rules, guiding behavior and relations to people occupying various social positions have religious justification. As I mentioned before, there is a common mix-up of ethnic and religious

Figure 4.2 The tomb of *Imamzade* in Ganja

norms and values. Strict social segregation of girls and boys is explained in religious terms (The girls said, "in a Muslim society it is *haram* for girls to meet with boys," "in our religion girls must be decent and modest"). Those Azerbaijani girls who lived in Europe for some time stated that the largest difference between Christians and Muslims was seen in gender relations. "We were surprised to see the freedom of Christian girls who used to meet with many boys before marriage. Our religion does not allow us this," one of the students concluded. As far as marriage is concerned, they cannot imagine having a non-Muslim husband. When I inquired into the reason for that, they explained that it is not only the religious requirement, but also their personal wish.

This concern for religion as a criterion in choosing a wife or a husband is frequently observed in Muslim families, even if their religiosity is confined to occasional religious practices. I happened to take part in a general discussion on religious topics in a Muslim house. The hosts, self-identified Muslims, were at first convincing me that I should visit *pir* in Nardaran and read the Koran. As a Muslim holiday *Kurban Bayram* (the Feast of Sacrifice) was approaching, they mentioned the story and rituals related to that event. My first impression of being among knowledgeable and practicing people was soon shattered

when, before dinner, the father raised a glass of vodka and proposed a toast: "Let us drink in the name of Allah for our meeting." He also confessed that he eats sausages from time to time. His wife, however, explained that it is not common to eat pork, because Islam forbids us this for the reason of health. But when the father raised an issue of the children's marriage, he suddenly became a strict Muslim: "My daughter can marry a foreigner, I will not oppose, but he must first become a Muslim and accept our customs."

Why do so many people adhere to the secular model of Islam? Tradition is certainly the main criterion of authority of this way of Islamic practice. Even though the experience of pluralism, or "perceived pluralism," is common to an increasing part of the Azerbaijani society, socialization into the religious worldview received in a family maintains its force. The prevalence of a secular outlook in the society also accounts for its popularity. Another reason for keeping an attachment to parents' secular understanding of religion is the widespread public image of new religiosity as too radical and too discordant with traditional ethnic culture. Still for other people new religious traditions are non-problematic, but unsuitable for their lifestyles. This became clear in a discussion I held with two secular families. For them, people practicing Islam in everyday life are doing a good thing. When I asked them about *namaz*, one of the women answered that they simply do not have time for praying. Islamic ritual requirements, such as five pillars, are seen as too demanding and time-consuming, thus omitting them is not considered a sin. Alcohol can also be justified, but only for men, who refrain from drinking during the Muslim fast (known in Azerbaijan as *Orujlug*) and *Muḥarram* (the mourning period of the Shiites). Further, there are families with both practicing and non-practicing members. In such cases people often decide themselves which way to follow, but basically a tolerant attitude towards religious beliefs prevails.

Eclecticism

The widespread lack of knowledge about Islamic doctrines accounts for a certain degree of eclecticism in adhering to a given variant of religion. Thus, in empirical social reality, divisions between Islamic traditions are often blurred; they interact and overlap. This tendency is more common among secular Muslims than among those who drift toward orthodoxy. The eclectic system of beliefs and practices is in fact typical of religious landscapes all over the former Soviet state (Borowik, 2002). This fact must also be taken into consideration while dealing with choices; a practice of merging elements of two traditions (a kind of tinkering) en-

ables believers to refrain from making a choice and, thus, lessens the impact of competition on the religious market.

There is an important aspect of bricolage in the Azerbaijani version. The heterodox, syncretic form of Islam developed for many decades in isolation from Islamic scholarly centres. Its mainstream status enables an average person to easily accommodate various ideas, if only they did not contradict existing ones. There are two basic forms of such bricolage: inter-religious and intra-religious. In the first case, as it will be exemplified below, people tend to enrich their basic religious tradition with some elements from other religions. In Azerbaijan, such a mix often refers to Islam, in its more heterodox secular version, and to Christianity in its Russian Orthodox model.

I once visited a house of my respondent, Fatima, who has been involved in the Salafi community for already one year. After having learned about the purist approach to religion among Salafi Muslims, I expected a new convert to follow, or, at least, to try to follow, all major rules typical of that group. At first glance, Fatima resembles a typical Salafi woman: she wears hijab in a non-traditional way, does not use make-up, and performs prayers with a great concern to all the details. Moreover, she has been attending Arabic lessons to be able to read the Koran in Arabic—a practice highly appreciated by Salafis. I found it surprising to see in Fatima's living room an exhibition of Orthodox Christian icons. She told me stories of particular saints depicted on wooden panels and explained how she had been gathering the whole collection. When I touched the problem of controversy around saint people in Islam, she replied that she is not a "radical, but a moderate Muslim." She said:

> I know that some of my sisters are against veneration of saints and criticize us for possessing icons. But I personally see no problem in praying to saint people and asking them for help. They do not replace God, but act as His "secretaries," listening to our wishes and passing them to God, so that he could solve them as quickly as possible. Thanks to saint people, the time needed to handle our maters is shortened.

It is also not uncommon for Muslims seeking religious experience or fulfillment of wishes to attend churches. Hafiza and her sister are taught by their mother (secular Shia Muslim) how to behave in an Orthodox church. Once, on Sunday, the girls were asked to visit the main church in the city to light candles in front of the icons of three saints and Jesus. They mother repeated saints' names several times and explained the icons' locations to her daughters. At each place, the girls had to say wishes; one for their mother's health, who suffers from a migraine, the second for a little baby in the family, and two others for their own private dreams. Then, Hafiza and Nuray learned how to make a proper sign of the

cross according to the Russian Orthodox Church. After some training, their father took us to the church, where the girls carefully performed the task.

Other stories from Hafiza's family illustrate the endeavours of Christian missionaries in Azerbaijan. Hafiza's mother could not have a child for eight years after marriage, a serious problem in a society where a woman is still judged by her ability to give birth. She was told to visit the home of God, but it must belong to a different religion. Additionally, it would be the best to pray abroad. Following this advice, the mother went with her husband to Saint Petersburg (called Leningrad at that time), and the same year she became pregnant. Another woman, Hafiza's relative, had only sons, but dreamed of a daughter. Someone gave her an advice to promise God that in case the next child was a girl the woman would give her a Christian name. Again, the wish has been fulfilled and the baby girl's name is Ludmila.

Similar observation about merging elements of Christianity into Muslim traditions has been made by Jerzy Rohoziński (2005). During his field work on the Absheron Peninsula in 2000, he noticed that some families not only had a Bible at home, but also consulted it in harsh life situations. Besides, his research confirms the tendency among Muslims to visit Christian churches from time to time.[4]

Having reviewed examples of an inter-religious form of bricolage, i. e., combining Islamic and non-Islamic elements, I shall now mention the intra-religious form of eclecticism. The most obvious type refers to Shia-Sunni differences, which had been diminished for many decades. In contemporary pluralistic landscape, eclecticism is observed in the religious life of individuals who, usually unconsciously, follow elements of both or more Islamic traditions. For instance, some of my respondents were students or teachers of Baku Caucasus University known for its close connections to Fethullah Gülen's community (the so-called *fethullahci* or neo-*nurcu* community). *Nurcu* Islam is characterized by scholars as modern, moderate, elitist, pragmatic, and respecting mystical forms of religiosity (Balci, 2008). In many conversations, I have been told that they "condemn Wahhabism," so I expected those people to keep a distance from Salafi mosques. However, as I discovered during interviews, some of Gülen's sympathizers see no problem in socializing with Salafis, and from time to time they pray in "Salafi" mosques. This phenomenon of interaction and overlapping of Islamic traditions will have inevitable implications for their development. Among other things, it can lead to more frequent "migrations" between religious groups,

4 The unorthodox attitude towards religious shrines is not a unique feature of the Caucasus. For example, in India it happens that Hindus pray at the tombs of pirs and Muslims, on the other hand, visit tombs of Hindu sadhus. I would like to thank an anonymous referee for this suggestion.

as well as to changes in organizational, doctrinal and ritualistic aspects of particular traditions.

4.4 Am I a Shia or a Sunni? The blurring of sectarian division

When I asked Azeris about their ways to religion, they usually pointed to the tradition of their ancestors as one of the main sources. One middle-aged man explained: "The basis for us, for our interest in Islam, was the tradition of our fathers and grandfathers that we followed since childhood." Generally, as I observed, an emphasis on family as a basic channel for transferring values, customs and norms is still very strong. My respondents used to underline that their ancestors were either Shia or Sunni, but in an "ethnic sense." This phrase referred to being a Muslim just for the sole reason of being born in such a family. The upbringing and socialization into one of these traditions was thus taken for granted, and not challenged. Certain differences visible in ritual matters did not disturb anyone, despite of the fact that both groups often prayed in the same mosques. A girl at the focus group explained that the Shia-Sunni divisions did not matter in the past: "Azerbaijan is historically a place of mixture of Shiism and Sunnism. There were marriages between both groups, and no problems resulted from it." Traditional Islam, with its usually limited ritualistic sphere, was transmitted from generation to generation. "Shiites have always lived alongside Sunnis. It was our tradition. At times, one group dominated, at times the second. During communism, there was an atheistic ideology, but people did not completely lose their faith and handed it down to their children," another man stated in a group discussion. I also discussed an issue of religiously-mixed marriages with a German teacher. She assured me that in Azerbaijan people tolerate such relationships, and gave me an example from her own family: a Muslim-Jewish marriage. When I asked her how do they get along with religious differences, she said that they attend a synagogue as well as a mosque.

In chapter 1, I discussed historical developments of the Islamic field. I pointed to some periods where discrimination or persecutions forced people to change or hide their religious preferences. It is curious that most Muslims nowadays are not aware, or do not want to be aware, of these facts, and paint a picture of Azerbaijan as a country where tolerance was always one of its main features. Nevertheless, it may be assumed that one cannot speak of free choice in the Azerbaijani past (as it is the case of most of the world). In Soviet times, still most of the people who regarded themselves as Muslims did not question their inherited tradition. Only a few of my respondents had given me examples

from their close surrounding of change in the religious affiliation, which was usually associated with marriage (e. g., a grandmother was a Sunni, and parents were Shia).

The Sunni-Shia division is relatively weak also due to another factor. A lot of Muslims, especially urban youngsters, are unaware of this problem. For them, the label of a "Muslim" is enough to determine their religious identity. That was, for instance, the answer I got from my flatmates, when I first enquired them about their religion. The girls were studying social sciences (International Relations and Law) and obviously had heard of Sunnis and Shias, but could not relate themselves to neither of these groups. The word "Muslim" summarizes everything about religion in the form and content their parents have taught them, even though it has evident Shia traditional elements. This was evident when I spoke to my friends about my forthcoming meeting with Ilgar Ibrahimoglu. The title "imam" is widely used in regard to this Islamic theologist and usually he is referred to as "an imam of the Juma Mosque in Baku's Old City." After my phone conversation, which the girls witnessed, I told them that it was an imam who called me back and we arranged details for the meeting in the next day. Hafiza scrutinized me with a sense of unbelief as she was taught, in accordance with a Shia tradition, that there are Twelve Imams and the last one, Mahdi, is in occultation. I could not, in her opinion, meet an Imam.

4.5 Cultural Muslims in post-Soviet states

The Muslim identity in post-Soviet Azerbaijan is complex and nuanced. For most people, religion is treated as an inseparable part of their culture—culture of the Caucasus, of post-Soviet area, of unique, local traditions passed from one generation to another. Islam is also, in the eyes of the people, an important pillar of Azerbaijan cultural heritage. Being a Muslim for many Azeris means diverse things, often contradictory. For some of them it is simply a synonym of ethnicity, for others, a term denouncing some socio-cultural norms which they regard as Islamic norms. Similar confusion and ambiguities have been observed by scholars studying culture of contemporary Chechens, Tatars, Uzbeks and other Muslims of the former Soviet empire.

There are reports from all over the Muslim republics on the ongoing popularity of shrine visitations. In the Soviet reports this aspect of religiosity was reduced mostly to mythology (Basilov, 1970). Post-Soviet ethnography shows more appreciation for the role and meanings of shrines. The lists of the most renowned *pirs* are being made. For instance, field material from the Samarqand province in Uzbekistan points to the existing hierarchy of saints in the popular discourse.

Saints and their "venues" are categorized and assessed by people. There are shrines which are located at the gravesites of Islamic theologians, teacher or leaders of Sufi brotherhoods and there are shrines built around a place where a miracle occurred or where a saint or sheikh simply stayed for some time. In Bukhara, such places are known as *avliyo* or *pir*, or, less frequently, *mazar*, *ziyārat*, ziyoratgoh, or a "place of visit." Muslims going to those sacred places often consider it to be a "Little Pilgrimage" to Mecca. The tombs of female saints also attract followers (Louw, 2006; Malikov, 2010).

To sum up, secularization is a social reality in Azerbaijan. Baku is commonly referred to as one of the most secularized Muslim cities in the world. For an average Azeri, the role of religion is very limited and does not act as a vital force shaping people's conduct, worldview, political choices, etc. Islam is widely accepted as an element of the cultural identity, but it is Islam reinterpreted in the context of local traditions and history. It is against this background—the dominant cultural and secularized Muslim identity—that the religious revival is so clearly and sharply seen. All kinds of new Islamic traditions and movements had to deal with the status quo. New Islamic preachers faced strong opposition from various segments of Azeri society who charge them with revolting against the tradition—which has an almost sacred status.

Chapter 5
Religious Revival and the Plurality of Choices

One of the most extraordinary things about contemporary Islam in the Caucasus is the relative weakness of sectarian divisions. All around the Muslim world it is widely assumed that the most divisive line in Islam goes between Sunnis and Shias. The hostile relations dating back to the very beginning of Islamic civilization are thought to determine the current situation in Muslim-majority countries. It is the first characteristic of Islamic pluralism that students usually learn while studying preliminary courses on Islam. This perspective is strengthened by media coverage from the Middle East, where religious divisions blend, often in a drastic way, with politics and family ties. Similar intra-religious tensions and conflicts I had expected to observe in Azerbaijan as well. This country, which has a significant Sunni population, is typically associated with noticeable Iranian influences and Shia beliefs, ideas and practices. Already during the restructuring of the Soviet empire (*perestroika*) in the 1980s there were voices among Western analytics that warned about possible dangers associated with the rising popularity of extremist and fundamentalist ideologies in the region. Iran was trying to export its Islamic revolution with a lot of fervour and spreading radical Shia ideas among Azerbaijani Muslims was a desired aim from the geopolitical perspective.

Indeed, when one sets out on a trip to Nardaran, a village located around 25 km north from Baku, he may get some ambiance of the Iranian-style Shia Islam. In the eyes of many journalists and scholars Nardaran is a stronghold of Shia traditional religiosity and cultural conservatism. This settlement attracted wide international attention after the events in June 2002 when, in clashes with the police, one person was killed and many others wounded. This conflict was quickly interpreted as an obvious sign of the Islamic revolution. The image of Shia "fundamentalist" activities that aim at destroying the secular state and secular law and replace them with the Iranian model is also held by the Azerbaijani authorities. After the protests in Nardaran, political elites from Baku tended to put the blame on the Iranian propaganda. More recently, in March 2013, when the village hosted protests against the arrest of an Islamic theologian, Taleh Bagirzadeh, Yevda Abrmemberamov, a member of the governing New Azerbaijan Party commented (Abbasov, 2013): "Even in Soviet times, Nardaran was under Iranian influence. Everyone in Azerbaijan knows that the residents of this village owe allegiance to Iran." In such popular claims, there is no doubt regarding pro-Iranian inclinations of religious, orthodox Shia followers. In the case of any protest involving Shia rhetoric and symbols, the first image that comes to mind is

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"Islamic fundamentalism." When, in addition, the mass media show pictures focused on women in long, dark niqabs, the thesis of Iranian activities in Nardaran and similar places is widely accepted.

In reality, not only the threat of Islamic fundamentalism as a significant force in the political life of Azerbaijan is untrue. Shia-Sunni tensions among Azerbaijani Muslims are, for the moment, weak, nuanced, and far from causing any serious problems. For the majority of Azerbaijanis religion is more an element of their culture than a crucial factor that guides their social or political decisions. The Sunni and Shia labels and identities have little relevance in social life and this situation refers not only to contemporary, Azerbaijan, but also to many other post-Soviet states. These religious etiquettes do not carry the same content as in the Arab Middle East. Surprisingly for the outsiders who visit the region for the first time, for a lot of people the only religious identification is a general "Muslim" identification. What's more, unlike in the "core" Islamic states the respect for secularism among Azeri Muslims and the separation between religion and the state is rarely questioned. In this respect, there are some similarities to Turkey and its tradition of Kemalism.

The main religion-related division, which is spontaneously invoked by Azerbaijanis, is thus not between Sunni and Shia, but between "cultural" (or, in another words, "traditional") and pious Muslims. Whenever I was talking about my research on pluralism in Islam with Azerbaijanis, they used to ask me: "Are you looking for 'religious' Muslims?" My interlocutors in Baku took it for granted that in order to do research on Islam I was searching not just for Muslims, since the majority of local Muslims are largely unaware of the Islamic teachings. The category of "religious" or "pious" Muslims forms a very vivid element in the public discourse. It is a relatively new category of people who publicly show their religious attachment and are known for religious observance. Those people are quite easily distinguishable by external symbols, such as the Islamic dress code. Many (but certainly not all) Azerbaijani religious women dress modestly —usually they wear hijab and cover most parts of their body. For men, the most distinctive sign of their religious observance is a small beard. Some of them, especially Salafis, also wear shorter trousers. Those "religious" Muslims are also widely known for regular praying (namaz) and frequent mosque attendance. But the distance between average "cultural" Muslims and the religious group is caused not by the way people dress. It is rather the salience of the new ideas and practices that arouses resistance. Religious Muslims are contesting the status quo, including the mainstream, traditional culture and established social relations. They bring the Islamic culture into the limelight and, as a result, religion with its various implications is increasingly present in everyday discourse, in media, at schools and universities.

Religious revival is a phenomenon related to the minority of Muslims living in the vast areas of Central Asia and the Caucasus. This empirical fact regarding the influence of Islam in society was often raised in my conversations with Azerbaijani scholars and journalists. They were anxious about Islam-related stereotypes. For them Westerners too often demonize Islam and equal Islamic revivalism with the rise of fundamentalism that would inevitably turn secular states into sharia-ruled political organisms. In fact, much less than 20% of Muslims consider themselves to be "religious," even though almost everybody in Azerbaijan underlines the Muslim identity. Nevertheless, in spite of its relatively small size, Islamic revivalism is important and fascinating due to many factors. First, it adds new colors to the ideological spectrum and makes Islam a debatable issue. There is a new dimension in the debates concerning public and private spheres. Second, religion is presented as a foundation for social norms and is claimed to justify various behaviors, such as new social norms governing men and women interactions. Thus, social change is taking place with a strong religious legitimacy. Thirdly, this phenomenon is dynamic and Islam in its diverse models is gradually spreading into various sectors of society. Islamic ideas find resonance among the poor and the unemployed, as the example of Nagorno-Karabakh refugees vividly illustrates. In the refugees' camps, preachers and missionaries who bring both material and spiritual help are more than welcomed. Islam is also attractive to the growing urban middle class and especially to the young people who are aspiring to become members of the global middle class with good education and prospects for life. For them, Turkey—and its model of Sunni Islam—is the point of reference. The religious revival in the era of globalization brings a diversity of identifications to local groups and communities. People are offered various Islamic models with their ideologies, practices and international networks.

What I would like to stress is that the current religious revival will determine the future of Islam in the region. The future is very uncertain and there is a great need for understanding this situation and its dynamics. Depending on the outcome of current competition between Islamic traditions Azerbaijan in the future may be either a Sunni or Shia majority country. So far, it seems that Sunni Islam, in the Turkish variant, attracts most new followers, but Shiism—in its various interpretations, not necessarily pro-Iranian, is not giving up. It is also likely that this present religious competition will provoke tensions between Sunnism and Shiism that characterize other Muslim regions.

In the current chapter I will focus on the "religious" Muslims and present contemporary Azeri Islam through the perspective of its internal divisions. Although, as I have underlined earlier, the sectarian divide does not translate into political fights or mutual hatred, it does exist. This internal split in Islam

gives people an opportunity to choose, more or less consciously, one of the options to follow. It is worth noting that it is not only the Sunni-Shia division that is relevant to Muslims. There are diverse models inside each of the branches that reinterpret Islam and offer further possibilities. Identification of those models and their characteristics is a tough empirical question.

The aim of the chapter is to contextualise Islam and its internal pluralism in contemporary Azerbaijan. For this reason, I find it useful to look inside the local Islam and identify the divisions that really matter to people and are significant either in private or public spheres. Such an approach entails rejecting the most common theoretical dichotomic frameworks that are usually used to describe the Muslim religion. The next chapter will be focused more on people's choices. I am trying to understand the process of changing the Muslim identity from the "cultural" to the "religious" one. This is a bottom-up perspective on understanding Islam as a social reality. The future of Islam will depend on the outcomes of contemporary rivalry between the models of Islam proposed by diverse groups and supported by diverse states. Those Islamic movements and leaders that can appeal to "cultural Muslims," and to identify their spiritual and socio-economic needs, as well as to present Islam in an attractive way will win the competition. It is vital to get the grasp of how this process is taking place.

Islamic Revival in the former USSR

After two decades following the dissolution of the USSR, the research on Islamic revival in the post-communist countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus is quite rich. Particularly since the beginning of the 21st century the topic of rising interest in Islam and religious identities among ordinary people has been receiving a lot of attention. Apart from the dominant topic of Islamism and Islamic radicalism (Wilhelmsen, 2009), there are also valuable works presenting empirical research on the social and cultural aspects of Islam with the focus on everyday Islam and religious practices of ordinary Muslims (e. g. Khalid, 2007; Poliakov, 1992; Rasanayagam, 2011; Roi, 2000). There were also larger projects, like the one at the Max Plank Institute of Social Anthropology in Halle, with a dedicated team of researchers conducting ethnographic studies with an explicit focus on religion in various Central Asian states. This project resulted in a very insightful book "The Postsocialist Religious Question: Faith and Power in Central Asia and East-Central Europe" (Hann, 2006).

It is, however, worth noting that this kind of scholarship is quite recent for this particular region. Field studies on the mainstream experience of the Islamic revival were not frequent in the late period of *perestroika*, when the phenomenon

became visible. As Rohoziński argues (2005, p. 9), the newly created fundamentalist movements in Central Asia were unnoticed during the first years after the Soviet Union had collapsed. He suggested that from the Western perspective the movements that today are seen as promoting radical religious ideals were interpreted as post-colonial uprisings against Russians. It was supposed to be a temporary ferment, complicated reaction of societies that unexpectedly (re)gained independence and had to reorganize almost all spheres of public life. The term "transition" was used to account for all unique processes. Therefore, Islamic movements in the region were treated as a temporary phenomenon, and were generally not linked to global developments in the Muslim umma. For some observers, the rise of Islam was an aspect of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The war between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 1988–1994 was sometimes presented as a Christian-Muslim war that supported the Huntington thesis of the clash of civilisations. This bloody conflict was then seen as a catalyst for Islamic renaissance, as a force that radicalised Azerbaijani Muslim against their rivals. In fact, Islam did not form a real basis for the war ideology, it was not a political argument.[1] However some years later, after signing a truce with Armenia, Islamic ideas were still gaining popularity and there was an increasing body of evidence that Islam was to become a constant part of post-Soviet life. Only then researchers set up to explore this process and its dynamics (see e. g., Abasov, 2001; Balci, 2004; Motika, 2001; Świętochowski, 2002; Tohidi, 1996, 1997; Valiyev, 2005).

One of the first publications to explore the religious revivalism in that part of the world was a collection *Muslim Communities Reemerge: Historical Perspectives on Nationality, Politics, and Opposition in the Former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia*, edited by Andreas Kappeler, Gerhard Simon and Georg Brunner (1994). It explored various dimensions of Muslim identities: national, tribal and religious. It was an early attempt to provide a more contextual framework for understanding the violent events in which Islam played a role. In 1993 Dmitri Trofimov undertook a research project consisting of a series of field visits to Central Asia and Azerbaijan to gather data on mosques and their leaders. His publications serve as one of the basic references concerning the official statistics and additional information regarding the numbers of mosques, biographies of their imams, numbers of worshippers, etc. (Trofimov, 1996). The sheer numbers of mosques provide us with a picture of the religious revival from early 1990. Table 5.1 presents the statistics on Friday mosques (known also as *jami*), which present

1 There were some small exceptions to this general trend, e. g. in October 1986 Baku hosted an international conference "Muslims for Peace," which was partially an attempt to build a platform for dialogue and a network of Muslims from the Soviet Union and the Middle East (MESC, 1986, p. 148).

Table 5.1 Numbers of Friday mosques in Central Asia and Azerbaijan Source: Trofimov, Dmitri (1996), p. 217.

	Jan. 1987	Jan. 1991	Jan. 1993	mid-1994
Uzbekistan	87	300	-	about 3000
Kazakhstan	25	63	-	over 500
Tajikistan	17	75	300	-
Turkmenistan	4	54	115	204
Kyrgyzstan	34	58	-	about 1000
Azerbaijan	18	84	300	about 600
Tatarstan	28	-	-	310

an important part, but only a part, of the total places of worship. Apart from Friday mosques, which are the largest and most influential, there are also smaller, more local mahalla mosques or *masjids*, and places of worship linked to a family.

The questions I find fascinating in studying contemporary Islam are its internal heterogeneity, flexibility and dynamics. Like in other world religions, Islamic scriptures allow for multiple interpretations. The religious revival brings those models of religions into open competition. To understand this religious pluralism, as it manifests itself in discourses and practices of Muslims, we need to identify the main groups, their leaders and activists. Besides, it is crucial to understand their types of capital (in Bourdieu's sense), strategies used in the intra-religious competition, the power relations, and geopolitical conditions.

In the contemporary public discourse in Central Asia and the Caucasus Islamic pluralism is frequently presented as an opposition between "traditional" and "fundamentalist" groups. This dichotomy still prevails in the contemporary public discourse, among journalists on one side, and analytics on the other. Generally, the former term refers to the "cultural Muslims," who follow local customs and keep the conventional social systems. The latter category, a synonym to "Wahhabi," describes those observant Muslims who contest the religious and social status quo. These schematic categories to some extent replaced older dichotomies, such as "official" (related to the state) Islam versus "unofficial" (independent), "high" (represented by urban elites) and "low" (rural), or "pure" (focused on the Scriptures of Islam) and "syncretic" (containing non-Islamic elements)[2]. While all these terms transfer some characteristics of religious forms,

2 For a critique of such approaches, see the review of scholarship on Soviet and post-Soviet Islam by DeWesse (2002); Grant (2011); Kemper (2009); Rasanayagam (2011); Saroyan (1997).

in the contemporary context of post-communist countries exposed to global and influences, such dichotomies are not of much use. A more fruitful way is to account for the present religious situation by employing the concept of discursive traditions in Talal Asad's (1986) interpretation. Such perspective allows us to appreciate a highly heterogeneous Islamic culture in its local context. As it was mentioned in the first chapter, the history of Islam in the Caucasus was extremely complicated and witnessed a large variation of religious branches and sects which either coexisted or competed with each other to win support of the local population. To some extent, today's religious diversity resembles that from the past.

In contemporary Azerbaijan, the most visible division that is evident in everyday life is between the secular attitude (as characterized in the previous chapter) common to the majority of local Muslims and the attitude of Islamic piety, which is promoted by a wide range of religious movements, groups, institutions and individual actors. The 'religious' minority is also extremely diverse. There are Shia pious communities, embracing conservative, liberal, political, or reformist discourses and Sunni pious groups which are further differentiated into orthodox, Sufi, Turkish, and inspired by Arabic countries—the Salafi interpretation of Islam. Moreover, Islamic modernism, an identifiable historic tradition, is being constantly redeveloped by a few distinct actors, mainly Muslim Azerbaijani intellectuals. Even though its influence in society at the moment is rather limited, the modernists may possibly respond to the demand for local religious authorities in the future.

As some experts argue (see, e. g., Peuch, 2004), Azerbaijan represents Islamic diversity to a larger extent than any other Muslim post-Soviet republic, because only in this country Turkish, Iranian, and Saudi Arabian models of Islam have similar "market share." With a gradual demise of the USSR, missionaries from many regions have been sent to promote "the only right" version of faith. Alongside, foreign charities and educational institutions were established. Fundamentalist groups are also present, but their activities in society are overestimated by the state and mass media. Scientific articles on Islamism in Azerbaijan rather stress the future possibilities and likelihood of winning mass support by Islamists than identify it as a crucial factor in Azeri socio-political life (Wilhelmsen, 2009). For that reason I decided to exclude this wing from my research. I will refer to fundamentalists only when I analyse the state policy concerned with the post-9/11 "war on terror," and social perception of radical religious groups.

5.1 Shiism

Shia Islam in Azerbaijan has its local well-developed infrastructure consisting of official mosques with their clergy and of multitude of shrines. Pilgrimages to holy places were, at least in the communist era, the most popular public manifestation of Shia religiosity. Some of them enjoy special status and attract the faithful even from remote corners of Azerbaijan and from abroad (see Balci, 2004; Grant, 2011). The rituals of *ziyārat* are highly privatized and do not require any kind of affiliation with a mosque or any other Islamic institution.

Official Islam, in practice represented mainly by the Shafei Shiites, has experienced continuities and changes in the last decades. Surprisingly, some religious structures stemming from the Soviet or even earlier times have survived political transformation almost unchanged. The Spiritual Board of the Transcaucasian Muslims was only renamed in 1989 to the Caucasus Muslim Board. Since 1980 it has been continuously headed by a Shiite scholar Haji Allahshukur Pashazade who holds the title *sheikh-ul-islam*. Haji Pashazade became the youngest Muslim boards' head since 1943. Directly before his appointment as the highest religious official in Azerbaijan, Pashazadeh served for four years as an *imam khatib* in the main mosque in Baku, known as Taza Pir. He is well educated, apart from Azeri, Turkish and Russian, which are often heard in Azerbaijan, he speaks Arabic and Persian (Trofimov, 1996, p. 210), which in the era of limited contacts with the Islamic world gave him a distinct advantage over his colleagues. During his university education he focused on the history of Islam and wrote a master's thesis on Islam in Azerbaijan. His doctoral dissertation was devoted to the institution of shura in Islam (*ibidem*). Political transformation has brought new opportunities for the class of official clergy. The problem of the lack of religious education under the Soviet rule was partially solved by the establishment of Islamic University in Baku in 1992 (in fact, an existing madrasa was transformed into a university).[3] This higher educational institution aims at preparing new group of clerics ready to take over mosques' leadership from mostly uneducated *akhunds* and mullas. I will later deal more thoroughly with the problem of clergy and the dispute over mosques and leadership in Azerbaijani Islam.

Shiism in Azerbaijani Islam does not amount to a set of occasional ritual practices. It has also a unique intellectual dimension. As a discursive tradition, it has always been developed in contact with Iran, the main centre of *Ithnā ʿAsharī* teachings. Iran's activities on different levels contributed to the revival

3 For more information on Islamic education in Azerbaijan, see Hunner-Kreisel (2008).

of Shiism among the Azerbaijanis, who had been isolated from the intellectual religious ferment since 1928 (Motika, 2001). It is thus not surprising that Iranian clerics turned out to be more successful in providing satisfactory knowledge on Shiite Islamic religion than the old local Azerbaijani establishment. After Azerbaijan regained independence, the major Iranian *muğtahids* began to appear among Caucasian Muslims and established their offices. According to my informants the institution of *wakīl* (legal agent) functions in Baku, for instance in the district of Ganjlic. In the capital, religious shops offer a wide choice of books on Shiism imported from Iran, which have been translated into Azeri and Russian languages. In 2009, during Baku's International Book Fair, on the Iranian stall around 200 books were promoted. Works of such prominent Shiite scholars as Ali as-Sistani, Fazil Lenkerani, Muhammad Huseyn Tabatabayi, Sayyid Mujteba, Musevi Lari are easily available. Among those prominent religious figures, *marğaʿ at-taqlīd* Ayatollah Fazil Lenkorani, who died in 2007, gained special respect and popularity among Azerbaijanis. It's worth noting that he descended from an Azeri family. His book *Risale* in its Azeri translation is quite popular. Among Lenkorani's students in Qom, there was a significant group of Azeri students. Having learned the science of Islamic law, they set out to spread knowledge and their master's ideas in their country (Balci, 2005). Shiism is also transmitted among the youth through self-education. Some young Shiites in Baku that I have talked to seek on their own for religious knowledge in the Iranian scholars' interpretations. Especially at present, as most foreign missionaries are not favoured by state authorities, self-education is crucial. Thanks to Internet, the rulings of Shiite scholars are easily accessible and most questions can be asked through this channel. Numerous Shia web portals and discussion forums are also increasingly popular. For the younger generation it's the easiest, cheapest and fastest way to get relevant information on a particular topic.

Traditional Shiite pious tradition is best exemplified by communities in three regions. One is the south of Azerbaijan, directly bordering Iran, where almost a third of Azerbaijani mosques function (Kuliev, 2005). Second is the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic, an enclave enclosed by Armenia, Turkey and Iran. The third centre consists of villages around Baku on the Absheron Peninsula, among which Nardaran is considered to be the most conservative and pious. It is noteworthy that most scholars researching Shiism in Azerbaijan are interested in the question whether the Iranian revolution has a chance to spread to this neighbouring country. They usually point to those elements of Shia doctrine which are conducive to radicalism, such as the religious idea of rebelling against injustice, oppression and tyranny. Portraits of Imam Husayn, who gave his life fighting against illegitimate ruler, are often treated in publications as signs of revolutionary ideas. On the other hand, there are a few recent studies that pro-

vide important insights into the empirical reality of Shia religiosity. Far Center's research (Hadjy-zadeh, 2005a,b) has been conducted in the south of Azerbaijan, in Astara and Lenkoran, where Shiite Muslims clearly dominate the religious landscape. Researchers have found out that almost all settlements have operating mosques, and that *pirs* are popular among inhabitants. Iranian missionaries use all possible opportunities to actively propagate Twelver Shiism and the ideas of Islamic revolution. According to Jerzy Rohoziński (2005), the pro-Iranian inclinations of the local Shiite population are nevertheless mostly exaggerated. His own field research on religion in Nardaran indicates that the claims about prospective revolution among Shiite Azerbaijanis are based mainly on "armchair research" which employs second-hand data to support the theses. He admits that the break-up of the Soviet Union has facilitated relationships between Azerbaijan and Iran, and that numerous initiatives have been carried out to attract people to Iranian doctrines. In Nardaran, for example, Iran had given money for a madrasa and a *pir*. What is more, an Iranian *akhund* teaching in the madrasa gathered his students to paint revolutionary slogans on the settlement's street-side walls. Shiite symbols, especially those referring to *Muḥarram*, function in the public sphere. Local people eagerly set out for pilgrimages to Meshed. Despite these signs and symbols, the local Shiite population, as Rohoziński argues, is far from accepting Iran as a spiritual and ideological patron. Contrary to the common perception, people from Nardaran do not feel attracted to Iranians, who are considered by them to be unmoral and slow-witted.

A political aspect of Shiism is also visible, although, in the light of negative state campaigns and unfavourable social attitudes, it does not influence the religiosity of most Shiites. Founded in Nardaran, the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan is probably the only well-known political organization promoting the Iranian model. Its relationships with the state are problematic. The leaders were accused of spying for the Iranian Republic; subsequently they got arrested and were sentenced to prison. Neither political (*wilāyat al-faqīh*, "rule of the Islamic Jurists"), nor spiritual (*marǧaʿ at-taqlīd*, "source of imitation") leadership of Iran's Supreme Leader seem to be considered as a serious option for an average Azerbaijani Shiite.

In this short overview, the well-known Azerbaijani Shiite reformist movement has to be mentioned. The Juma mosque ("Friday mosque") community in the old "Inner City" in Baku, the Icheri Sheher, and its leader imam haji Ilgar Ibrahimoglu have received a lot of public attention. What they propose is a synthesis of Islam and democratic values. Ibrahimoglu's struggles with the authoritarian regime and with official Islamic structures made him a chief representative of oppositional or "independent" Islam in Azerbaijan. His opponents criticize him for "promoting radical Shia ideas." The main argument used

Figure 5.1 Juma Mosque in Baku with its original minaret from 1442

against the imam is his educational background, as he studied in Iran. It is true that Haji Ilgar received his scholarly degrees in that country, as he publicly admits, but it is also true that neither in his writings nor speeches does he summon believers to follow the Iranian model. On the contrary, his activities are aimed at promoting human rights and liberal democratic values. As Haji Ilgar has told me during our first meeting, he studied these topics in Poland at Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, which was led at that time by Marek Nowicki, a famous human rights defender who reported on communists' abuses. Ibrahimoglu's anti-state rhetoric, alongside an increasing popularity, posed too much threat to the ruling elite. Therefore, after the presidential elections in 2003, which were widely considered by external observers as fraudulent and ended with the post-election demonstration, the imam was arrested and charged with using his religious authority for political gains. Such actions are defined by the Azerbaijani law as illegal. As these tough measures did not prevent Ibrahimoglu from oppositional work, government officials evicted the community from the mosque's building, claiming that the community leaders failed to pass registration at the State Committee on Work with Religious Organizations (SCWRO), and that the mosque as a part of national heritage must undergo ur-

gent renovation.[4] This issue has been constantly addressed by international human rights organizations, but for the moment nothing has changed. Following the decision of the head of the Caucasus Muslim Board, *sheikh-ul-islam* Pashazade, the mosque has been mandated to an *akhund* with "appropriate" official certificates. In 2009, during my stay in Baku, the mosque was managed by Haji Surhay Mamedov, who represents Shiite views and fully supports the official Islamic hierarchy. The group of Ilgar Ibrahimoglu continues to function, but in a private place. It has, nonetheless, retained the name "Juma mosque community." Its religious activities are closely related to human rights issues and are conducted in the framework of an organization known as DEVAM. At present, as Ibrahimoglu's followers do not have "their" mosque, it is hard to estimate how numerous the community is. In 2004, according to its imam, there were around 1000 members (Bedford, 2009, p. 102). Now, as I have witnessed, only a small group attends weekly lectures, but at the same time Internet social networks related to Haji Ilgar are much more numerous.

In his preaches and public activities, Ibrahimoglu calls for democratic and liberal values, which in his opinion should characterize the Islamic world. Shiite symbols in his understanding have not only strictly religious, but also political and moral meanings. In fact, it is an idea common to a lot of Muslims that all spheres of life belong to religion and it does not make sense to speak of religion as a separate field.

Ilgar Ibrahimoglu is actively engaged in the debate on the role of Islam in the public sphere, which constantly turns up as controversies around visible aspects of Islam continue. Protests against unofficial bans on wearing hijabs in schools and universities unite Islamic activists. One of such prominent Shia theologians is Elshan Mustafaoglu, a founder of an Azerbaijani organization called *Menevi Saflig Devet Ictimai Birliyi* (Social Union for the Appeal to Moral Purity). A recent study on this community, made by Bruno de Cordier (2013), shows some useful light on its genesis and modes of operation. Its founder, known also as Haji Elshan, had a typical biography of a "born-again" Muslim, who discovered true Islam in a young age, when the Soviet empire was beginning to collapse and the Nagorno-Karabakh war began. In 1989, he joined a Muslim youth organization, which was one of the local agents promoting the "religious revival."

4 For more information on the political sides of the conflict see, e. g., Bedford (2009) and Cornell (2006).

5.2 Sunnism

In Baku, which is attracting population from all regions of Azerbaijan, one can find numerous variants of Sunni traditions. The main competitors to deep-rooted local Sunnism are: the Turkish branch of Sunni Islam, and inspired by Arabic countries Salafism. Historically, Sunnism of the Hanafi legal school developed in the north of Azerbaijan, which is understandable since the Northern Caucasus has predominantly Sunni character. Its adherents belong to both Azeri and non-Azeri ethnic groups. It is estimated that around 80% of the Azeris living in the north are also Sunni (Kotecha, 2006, p. 18). For religious education those people tend to choose nearby Dagestan—a strong centre of Sunnism, which has a reputation of being "more religious" than Azerbaijan. However, the existing state religious policy rather discourages people from seeking knowledge outside Azerbaijan. For instance, the state does not allow people educated abroad to take leadership positions in the religious sphere. This factor contributes to a general unfavourable feeling local population has towards the Azerbaijani political establishment. It is one of the factors contributing to more radical sentiments and activities in the north.

As in the case of Shiites, Sunni Muslims also practice *ziyārat* to numerous shrines or other pilgrimage places in Azerbaijan and abroad. *pirs* in Dagestan are frequently visited. Most Azerbaijani villages have informal mosques, prayer houses, or rooms. In some of them believers lead the prayers themselves, in other they invite a person regarded as a religious specialist, usually someone who has some knowledge of the Koran or who is widely perceived as a spiritual man. A lot of *pirs* in that region are weakly related to Sufism, which used to be influential in Northern Azerbaijan for centuries. Today participation in a Sufi order is certainly not a popular practice, but still some forms of Sufi tradition exist. My respondents from Baku confirmed the activity of a Nakshbandiyya brotherhood in that region. One of them told me about his grandfather who had been a *murīd* of that *ṭarīqa*, and was considered to be a very religious man. However, such accounts suggest that embracing Sufism in its classic form is rather an exception than a rule. Bruce Grant (2011, p. 669) while researching the life of shrines related to Islam in rural Azerbaijan also noted the lack of traditional Sufi attributes, such as master-student model of education. Rural Azeri *pirs* constitute a very heterogeneous reality and cannot be reduced to the tradition of Sufism. This stands in sharp contrast to the lively Sufi tradition across North Caucasus and Central Asia (Kehl-Bodrogi, 2006).

There are also places of worship on the Georgian territory which are popular among Azeris. One of them is the tomb of a famous Sufi preacher that had come from Dagestan—"Isa Efendi," as the local population calls him (see Sanikidze,

Figure 5.2 The tomb of a Sufi Sheikh Isa Efendi in Kabal

Walker, 2004).[5] His tomb, located in Kabal—a village in the Lagodekhi region of Georgia bordering Azerbaijan, attracts not only Sunni, but also Shiite Azeris. The cemetery is guarded by the sheikh's ancestors, most of whom are Azeris, as the grandson of the saint explained me when I visited the village in 2008.

My field research in Azeri communities in Georgia, which are in contact with Azerbaijan, confirms that Muslims attach significant importance to religion during life cycle events, such as wedding or someone's death. Weddings and funerals are usually accompanied by a mulla. Occasionally, after someone's death, a group of people gather to perform a *ḏikr*. Religious figures preside also over weddings. As distinctions between Sunnism and Shiism significantly diminished during communism, it was not surprising to see a Sunni Muslim celebrating common Shiite rituals, such as the *ʿĀšūrāʾ* commemoration, or a Shiite making a pilgrimage to a Sunni *pir*, or performing the *ḏikr* (Sanikidze, Walker, 2004).

Salafism: Between Piety and Fundamentalism

The prevalence of "unorthodox" practices and a lack of scholarly knowledge about Islamic religion made the local traditional Sunnism an object of attack from all kinds of revivalist Sunni movements. The main opponents to *ḏikr* and *ziyārat* are representatives of Salafism, commonly referred to as Wahhabism. In the Caucasus, this term represents a radical-reformist Islamic tradition that first appeared in the region in the 1970 – 1980s. Etymologically and ideologically, this tradition dates back to the 18th century, when in present-day Saudi Arabia, Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab managed to mobilize his followers to take part in the struggle against traditional understandings and practices of Islam. Following the Hanbali *maḏhab* (widely regarded as the most strict and conservative), Salafis of the Caucasus continue the reformist program, but the objects of attacks vary depending on local contexts. In Dagestan, where Sufi orders have gained significant social support, Wahhabis directed their attacks at that tradition and all kinds of Sufi-like rituals. In Azerbaijan, the major object of the debate is the "unorthodox" attitude to Islam, related not directly to Sufism, but rather

5 Efendi is also remembered and revered by the Kists of Chechen descent living in the Georgian Pankisi gorge. He made weighty contribution to the spread of Islam in that community. In one of Pankisi villages there is still a room where the saint lived. His followers, commonly referred to as *murīds* of the sheikh Efendi, gather every week to perform a silent *ḏikr* (ceremonial activity of the remembrance of the name of God) according to his teachings. Although the sheikh died in 1930s, he is still remembered locally as one of the greatest teachers of Islam. For more information on the practice of Islam among Kists and Chechens in Georgia, see Wiktor-Mach (2009).

to ethnic or secular approaches to religion. Although it's hard to speak nowadays of Sufi Islam in the form of traditional *ṭarīqas* in the South Caucasus, the cult of saint people is widespread among Azerbaijani Muslims. These practices are the main focus of controversies over what constitutes the "proper" understanding of Islam. In this competition, Sunni traditions inspired from outside of Azerbaijan managed to give new meanings to the term "Musulmanchilik" (being a Muslim). In this process of reinterpretation of Islam, Salafi leaders turn to an idealized past, when the Muslim community lived according to the norms and values Prophet Mahomet transmitted from Allah. The discursive focus on the past is one of the issues that differentiate Salafi tradition from another influential Sunni Islamic group—the Turkish Nurcu movement.

In Azerbaijan, Salafism found its followers mainly in the historically Sunni northern region and in Baku. Sunni preachers have been coming from Arab countries, Chechnya, and Dagestan since the beginning of the 1990s to propagate their revivalist and reformist ideas. Meanwhile, young Azerbaijanis were offered scholarships to study theology in Arab countries. In that process, a new local Salafi elite developed.

In the capital, the most well-known symbol of this tradition is the Abu Bakr mosque founded by the Azerbaijani branch of a Kuwaiti charity organization "The Revival of Islamic Heritage," but the mosque's activities were to be covered by the visitors themselves, as the imam assured in a press interview (Gamet, 2008). Since its opening in 1998, it has been led by a charismatic young imam, Haji Gamet Suleymanov, a graduate of the World Islamic University of Medina. After the mosque established its reputation as one of the most popular in the capital, political problems appeared. Mass media systematically featured stories of extremist and militant Islamist groups allegedly associated with the mosque. As the tension intensified, state authorities attempted to close Abu Bakr on the grounds that it had been functioning without official registration.[6] But it was not until a terror act at the mosque was committed in August 2008 that the officials succeeded with their plan (President Azerbaydzhana, 2008). At present, the Salafi community is allowed to function, but their main mosque remains closed. During the Friday congregational prayer in the area of the Abu Bakr mosque, I have seen only a couple of Salafi-looking people just wandering around or visiting neighbouring shops with Islamic products. Some followers of Salafism gather at the Lezgi mosque in Icheri Sheher, but that historical place is too little to accommodate many people. Even before the terrorist act, many of the

6 The mosque was eventually registered in 2002, but its leader Suleymanov was not approved by the Caucasus Muslim Board (International Crisis Group, 2008).

several hundred Muslims that gathered there on Friday had to pray outside, on carpets (International Crisis Group, 2008). For that reason women are discouraged from coming, since, for them, Friday prayer in a mosque is not obligatory. They either perform *namaz* at home or visit other, even Shia, mosques. Once, when I accompanied two Salafi people to a prayer in the Old City, the man went straight to the Lezgi mosque, while the woman went with me to the nearby Juma mosque, which is known for its Shia *akhund* and has Shia visual symbols. In the women's part, Sunnis prayed alongside Shiites, which is an evidence of a certain level of tolerance, and a lack of open discrimination of people adhering to different branches of religion.

The Salafi community is not homogeneous. While on the most general level Salafism makes a powerful appeal to the purities of Islamic religion, the actual implementation of "pure" Islam takes various forms. The overwhelming majority of orthodox Muslims are devout people developing a purist habitus to Islam without having any political aspirations. Conservatism, which is usually attributed to Salafi Islam, refers to strictly doctrinal and ethical issues, such as the belief that the Koran and Sunna contain all rules stating how a good Muslim should live. According to this view, nothing in Islam can be modified, because Islamic Scriptures are complete and infallible. Contemporary norms regulating social relations and institutions should therefore be modelled upon those that were biding in the first Muslim community. The term "conservatism" does not, however, refer to all Salafi attitudes. *Ahl al-sunna*, as Salafis call themselves, are not opposing all aspects of the modern world. On the contrary, many of them use modern information and communication technologies. In my opinion, instead of using the term conservatism, it is more appropriate to speak of Salafi reformism. It conveys the sense that this movement proposes innovations in the social sphere, although it uses the discourse of the Golden Age of the first Muslim generations.

Apart from this vast majority of Azerbaijani Salafis focused on Islamic spirituality and morality, there is also a much smaller group representing radical and non-conformist attitudes, who may be called fundamentalists. In understanding the phenomenon of fundamentalism, I follow Bassam Tibi's framework (1995), which postulates three complementary schemes of thinking. Fundamentalism, in his view, shall be seen as (1) a political ideology, (2) an anti-Western or anti-modern worldview, (3) an ideology of conflicts. In the post-Soviet context, Islamic fundamentalist groups are not only engaged in changing political structures of power, but they endeavour to do so using militant methods. Wars in North Caucasus, Afghanistan and Pakistan only increase fundamentalists' radi-

calization. In Azerbaijan, the so-called *ḫawāriğ* ("the expelled"),[7] or, less frequently, Qutbist,[8] Muslims have rebelled against the leader of the Salafi community. In their view, Suleymanov is too conformist and apolitical and rejects violent actions against the state, which shall be permissible under some conditions. According to some observers, these radicals are behind the terror attack at the Abu Bakr mosque in 2008. Such a version is also upheld by the *sheikh-ul-islam*, who attributed the bombing to the internal struggles in the Salafi community (International Crisis Group, 2008; Valiyev, 2008).

Despite the inner differences and tensions regarding particular aims and methods of activity, Salafi ideology formulates some general concepts. Salafis strongly oppose any practices and beliefs that cannot be justified on the basis of the Koran and the hadiths. Only their leaders' interpretation is accepted. Unlike followers of the Hanafi school of law, Salafis do not accept local customs, such as *ziyārat*, and call for the replacement of non-Islamic habits with the "pure" Islamic order. Such strategy usually raises objections of the local population attached to their culture and traditional forms of worshiping. From them, the value of traditional Islam lies partially in the continuity of practice that is being passed from one generation to another (even if it is an "invented tradition.") In Azerbaijan, a strong social opposition has emerged towards this Sunni branch, which, however, does not prevent many young people from embracing Salafism.

Modern Orthodoxy in Turkish Islam

Not all pious Sunni movements that recently appeared in the Caucasus and Central Asia are as radical as Salafi in their socio-cultural ideologies. In fact, the followers of Salafi tradition face tough competition from the Turks who successfully promote their interpretations of Islamic religion inspired by the Hanafi school of Islamic law. There are three features that distinguish Turkish Islam from other Sunni traditions: a Sufi orientation (there is more willingness in Turkish Islam to embrace Sufi tradition as a part of the Islamic identity than in Salafism), state-centrism, and openness to local cultures (Yavuz, 2008). Rooted in Turkey's unique experiences with religion and the secular state, this tradition of Islam fits Azerbaijan's secularism. Ethnic ties between the people of Turkey and Azerbai-

7 The name is after the Kharijite sect that originated in the seventh century.

8 Sayyid Qutb was the leading intellectual of the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood.

jan also play a crucial role: it is easier to accept novel interpretations from a "brother" nation, using the pan-Turkish term.

The expansion of this Islamic tradition benefited from the pro-Turkish policy and liberal measures in religious policy of independent Azerbaijan. Those factors enabled the rapid expansion of official and legal religious groups functioning under Turkish state structures that cooperate with Baku. The Directorate of Religious Affairs of Turkey has engaged itself in the "re-Islamization" of Central Asia and the Caucasus, actively supporting religious institutions, offering scholarships for high school and university studies, educating imams, and supporting missionary activities. By 1996, Imam Training Centres established by Turkey had almost 900 students from Azerbaijan (Yavuz, 2008, p. 134). The directorate was also responsible for founding the Faculty of Theology at the largest public university—Baku State University. Today, some of its graduates form an academic elite and are actively engaged in studying and teaching Islam. So far, several mosques have been financed by Turkish authorities; the most popular is the "Shahidlar mosque" located near the Martyr's Alley[9] in Baku.

The second layer of Turkish Islam has less-official and more diverse forms. Turkey-based religious groups, such as *nurchular* or Topbas are very active, although their finances do not come from the Turkish state. Osman Topbas founded the Azerbaijani Youth Aid Foundation, which provides help to refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh and was also involved in the construction of a branch of Baku Islamic University (International Crisis Group, 2008). The most prominent Turkish movement that found supporters among Azerbaijanis and Central Asian Muslims is known as *nurcular*, which is rooted in the Said Nursi's (1873–1960) teachings. Currently they are spread mostly in the interpretation of his student, a charismatic preacher from the city of Izmir, Fethullah Gülen (b. 1938)[10]. Followers of that intellectual tradition, known also as *fethullahci* or as the Hizmet movement[11], form very active social networks and constitute a highly influential religious segment in Turkey and abroad. Although the Hizmet is active since 1960s, it was not until 1990s that is gained transnational character and began

9 This place occupies an important place in the social consciousness of the Azerbaijanis, as it commemorates people ("martyrs") who lost their lives in clashes with enemies—Armenians and Soviets.

10 Apart from the Gülen's followers, there are also other groups that develop and reinterpret Nursi's ideas, as the Nurcu movement split itself after its founder's death in 1960 (Yavuz, 2000, p. 14).

11 This term, meaning "service," or "serving the community," is preferred by the movement's members themselves, as they do not want to put too much emphasis on its founder. Nevertheless, the term Gülen movement is widely used by scientists.

exporting its ideology and establishing various initiatives in hundreds of countries outside Turkey. Unlike the mystic cult of Sufi brotherhoods, or more ritualistic and strict Salafism, Turkish Islam, including its *nurchu* version, puts more emphasis on the ethical side of religion. Craving for spiritual and ethical development has a high priority. Such focus does not mean that rituals are considered to be unnecessary. Turkish pious interpretation of Islam is rather a combination of ethics, religious orthodoxy and modernity. Political topics are generally avoided, at least in the public discourse, in line with the example of Said Nursi, who in spite of being a fierce critic of Kemal Atatüre's secularization policies, never directly got involved in politics. It shall be however remembered that large social movements can hardly be homogeneous, so it is almost impossible to present their concepts and activities in a very comprehensive and systematic way. Gülen's supporters often underline that the ideas they present are their interpretations of the leader. There are some arguments against *fethullahci* that the group has a hidden agenda of planning a coup d'état or that it's building a state inside the state, but no evidence is presented. Those who publicly speak in favour of Gülen's teachings stress their distance from politicised Islam. A Board Member of the Gülen Institute and a scientist—Dr. Y. Alp Aslandogan (2012)—advocates the need for a truly democratic state that allows a peaceful coexistence of various cultures and religions. Religion shall not interfere with politics, since such a relationship is harmful to both sides. However, strictly secular ideology is also unacceptable. As a result of kemalism that renounced any aspect of religion and treated religion as an opposition to rationality and progress, observant Muslims suffered discrimination.

By employing the term "modern orthodoxy" to Turkish Islam I wanted to point to a parallel, but more well-researched phenomenon—an identifiable trend among contemporary Orthodox movements in Judaism (which function alongside Conservative and Reform traditions), namely so-called "Modern Orthodox Judaism." Although all Orthodox Jews claim that *halakhah* (Jewish religious law) is crucial to Judaism, they differ in their dress codes, attitudes to secular environment, and interpretations of some rulings of law. In Europe, modern orthodox model of Judaism was articulated by a rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808 – 1888) already in the 19th century. A basic dogma, which was developed in a discussion with other Jewish traditions, opened a possibility for an observing Jew to study secular sciences. Hirsch did not only approve of the coexistence of religion and modern science. He claimed much more—that the real message of the Torah could be found through secular studies. There is also another crucial theme in Hirsch's teachings: "a distinction between what the modern Jew needed to render unto Caesar and what he or she needed to render unto God" (Levenson, 2006, p. 42). In other words, he supported the idea of "cultural, political, and

intellectual assimilation and strict observance of the *mitzvot*" (commandments) (*ibidem*). Finally, a liberal approach towards living in a secular democratic country and tolerance to other faiths and denominations are characteristic of modern orthodox Jews. The similarity of habitus between this Jewish model and Islam of Nursi's followers whom I met in Baku was striking to me. Even though many people are not directly accustomed with Nursi or Gülen's writings, they share this Jewish openness to secularity, modernity and science with a rigorous observance of religious law, rules, and rituals. Their ideology is progressive and future-oriented, but at the same time rooted in tradition. For Gülen tradition, in his interpretation, is crucial in forging the Muslim identity and in undertaking intercultural or inter religious dialogues. Muslims that engage in the global world shall be self-conscious Muslims with a good knowledge of their roots. A knowledgeable and confident attitude is a pre-requisite for dialogue. This aspect of linking past heritage with globalization is a feature that distinguishes Gülen from many contemporary Muslim intellectuals living in the West that look for a Muslim identity that fully encompasses Western world views.

Sometimes referred to as neo-Sufism, Nursi's teachings are rooted in the ideas of Nakşibendi and Kadiri Sufi orders. Nursi's students and followers belonged to *Nur Talebeleri* (followers of light)—an organizational hierarchical structure that bore a resemblance to a Sufi order. Soon they became known as the "Nurcu movement." The most well-known of his books, the opus magnum known as the "Risale-i Nur" (The Epistles of Light) has 6000 pages. In this Islamic exegesis, Nursi presents his ideas, suggesting they had been sent to him from God. In his publications Nursi aimed to accomplish his socio-political vision for the post-Ottoman Turkey. He endeavoured to increase the Muslim identity and religious consciousness, to revitalize the faith among people. This call to Muslims to search for a religious dimension in everyday life was in stark contrast with the dominant secular ideology of the Turkish state. Nursi also contested the content of education, which he perceived as too atheistic and positivistic, leaving no place for religious outlook. In the search for an optimal educational model, he was arguing in favour of reconciling scientific achievements with broad Islamic principles. The teachings of the Koran were, in his view, multi-layered enough to leave ample room for various interpretations. He saw no contradiction between personal freedom and religion, as well as between tradition and modernity. Nursi's achievement lies in adapting Islamic concepts to the changes in contemporary world, particularly in aligning Islam with the human rights discourse, science, inter religious dialogue and the acceptance of state institutions with the rule of law. An ideal Muslim was someone who was pious and at the same time not fanatical, someone accepting progress, but not forgetting about religious reality permeating all aspects of reality (Yavuz, 2000, p. 7). As Dale

Table 5.2 Turkish High Schools, their staff and students in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Source: Yavuz (2008).

Country	Number of High Schools	Number of Students	Number of Personnel from Turkey
Kazakhstan	32	6539	670
Azerbaijan	15	4023	368
Uzbekistan	18	3334	210
Turkmenistan	16	3290	373
Kyrgyzstan	14	3093	391
Tatarstan	6	2802	267
Tajikistan	5	1694	107
Dagestan	5	1228	143
other[a)]	18	2778	461

[a)]Baskurtistan, Siberia, Russia, Cuvasia, Crimea, Karacay.

F. Eickelman argues (2007): "The life of Said Nursi and the *Risale-i Nur* thoroughly exemplify modernity (...), not least because by personal example Nursi stimulated *individual* critical thought and reflection on how to think about justice, morality, and personal responsibility. (....) Nursi's writings and life suggest by example how religion and reason are compatible, although this compatibility requires struggle and pragmatism."

The contemporary Turkish tradition in Azerbaijan is to a large extent the religion of urban, educated, and mostly young people. The channels enabling the diffusion of the Turkish model are diverse: educational institutions, business circles, sermons at Turkish mosques, religious literature, mass media, and social networks. In Azerbaijan, religious figures occasionally appear on TV. There was, for example, an operating TV channel "Samanyolu," and a newspaper "Zaman" which are regarded as close to the Gülen Movement (Hasanov, 2003). However, the main channel of diffusion and the main priority of the movement is education. Educational networks of the *fethullahci* function in every major Azerbaijani city. However, the institutions are often loosely connected with each other. There is no a single uniform model that such initiatives shall follow.

Educational institutions related to Turkey in Central Asia and Azerbaijan have mushroomed in the last decade. The Turkish Ministry of Education has established eighteen high schools in the whole region, whereas people close to Fethullah Gülen founded 129 high schools and several universities (Yavuz, 2000, p. 126). Muhammed Çeton (2008) warns against using the term "Gülen schools," which suggests a similarity in terms of organizational structure and methodology employed, as it is, for instance, in the case of a network of Montessori schools. It's more proper to speak of Gülen-inspired schools and other initiatives, which

again reminds one of the lack of rigid form of this movement. Table 5.2 shows the number of schools, teachers, and administrators from Turkey, as well as the number of students in those republics of the former USSR where this phenomenon is most advanced. Success of these schools is not related to religion, because the curriculum is strictly secular and the emphasis is put on empowering young people to take leadership positions in various fields: as teachers, judges, engineers, lawyers, doctors, etc. Programs offered in Turkish schools have much higher quality than in an average public school and much stronger emphasis is placed on physical sciences than it is in average school. Another advantage is that the language of instruction is English. The Caucasus University, which is supported by the *fethullahci* movement, is one of the best universities in Azerbaijan. Altogether, these factors account for the exceptionally good position of graduates on local and international market places and prepare them to leadership functions in public life. In this process, a new kind of elite is being formed which may, in the future, delegitimize the existing status quo, as it is already visible in Turkey, with "an intra-class battle between old and new elites" (Hendrick, 2009, p. 345). Later I will try to explain how these educational networks influence youth's religiosity and worldview.

5.3 Reformism

Another contemporary interpretation of Islam and its role in society is developed by reform-oriented Muslims. They have been making a conscious effort to redefine religious ideology and practice. An example of this approach has already been mentioned in regard to the Shiite Juma mosque community led by Imam Ibrahimoglu. Proponents of reformism believe it is an imperative to rethink Islamic heritage and adapt Islamic religion to the new conditions of the modern and globalizing world. In their efforts to change some elements of Islam and Islamic culture, the actors indirectly refer to the global tendency of Islamic modernism, which originated in the 19th century, when the Muslim world was confronted with more developed Western societies. Moreover, this tradition, as being opposed to "Modern Orthodoxy," bears resemblance to the Reform Jewish Movement, known also as Liberal or Progressive. In Judaism, the basic defining feature of reformism is the rejection of the binding nature of law. Since its conception, representatives of this trend have tried to bring its societal norms and values into greater conformity with those of the non-Jewish majority of society (see Steinberg, 1965).

This reformist-modernist approach to Islam originated in Azerbaijan during the Russian colonization and was subsequently reworked under communist

rule. This tradition is still noticeable nowadays and receives quite a lot of public attention, albeit it's influence on society at the moment is rather limited. For modernists, it is not the piety that receives a lot of attention. Their approach to religion is more intellectual and ethical. There are two distinct groups that represent this reformist understanding of Islam in Azerbaijan. One of them is a group of clergy centred around the Caucasus Muslim Board and the *sheikh-ul-islam*. Already in Soviet times these institutions undertook a program of modernization of Islam. At that time it meant struggling with folk "impure" aspects of religion (this aspect is today typical of the Salafi ideology), the backwardness of mullas, and the cruelty of public celebration of *ʿĀšūrāʾ*. At present, the idea of change is visible among some members of the official religious hierarchy. The Muslim Board and the Islamic University have seriously undertaken work to lessen the Shia-Sunni divisions. This way of redefining Islamic sectarianism has a long tradition in Azerbaijan, and would probably lead to success if it weren't for the revivalist movements that raise awareness of conflictual issues between Islamic traditions.

The clearest example of reforming the Shiite tradition and bringing it closer to Sunnism is the official clergy's stance toward *ʿĀšūrāʾ* commemoration of Imam Husayn's martyrdom. Attempts at changing forms and meanings of Shiite rituals were made repeatedly in the past under the slogan of modernizing religion. In recent years, the Kadee Council of the Caucasian Muslim Board issued official fatwas before the month of *Muḥarram*. These statements, announced publicly in national newspapers and Internet, confirm the sacred, solemn, and tragic character of that month. The fatwas remind believers about some basic duties, obligations and restrictions derived from religion (for example, that it is forbidden to hold battles, organize weddings or parties during *Muḥarram*). Fatwas have several layers. One of these is the educational project. There is always a short information reminding the faithful about the meaning of *ʿĀšūrāʾ* (that the Imam Husayn and supporters of *ahl al-bayt* were killed on that day). Another function of the fatwas is strictly political and concerns strengthening the Azerbaijani identity. There is usually a call to commemorate at this occasion the martyrs who died for the liberation of Azerbaijan. Finally, the aspect that is crucial for our topic—Islamic reform. Fatwas issued by the official clergy are directed against the "essence" of traditional Shiite ceremonial life, which was revived after 1991 and gained significant support in some segments of the society.[12] Every year, dozens of people gather on the day of *ʿĀšūrāʾ*, chanting the name of Huseyn. some of them whip themselves with sharp chains or cut themselves

12 In 1992–1993, for the first time, a large number of believers took part in *ʿĀšūrāʾ* rituals at the Taza Pir mosque (Heyat, 2002).

with knives. The popular ritualistic flogging, so often observed in Shiite communities all over the world, is considered to be haram by the Azerbaijani official clergy. *Sheikh-ul-islam* frequently underlines that the martyrdom of Imam Huseyn should be understood in another, "right" manner. In order to pay respect to those killed at Karbala, the scholars invite Muslims to participate in actions of blood donation, which are held during the month of *Muḥarram*. Thus, blood can serve humanitarian purposes. Such actions are organized annually at the Taza Pir—the central mosque in Baku. As this redefinition of *ʿĀšūrāʾ* is a recommendation of the official Muslim hierarchy, *akhunds* at mosques should "increase consciousness" of believers to make them aware of what is "proper," and what is not. Such actions constitute powerful tools in reinterpreting the Shia ideology as well as changing the ritualistic sphere. Let us take a look at one example of an implementation of the reform—a few sentences from a public speech of a Shiite imam from Baku:

> It is haram and sin to feast during *Muḥarram*. The religious figures must summon the people to avoid celebrations on these days. (...) Muslims all over the world are commemorating these days in a special manner. We also have to behave worthy in accordance with our national-spiritual values (Old City, 2009).

Apart from the official religious hierarchy, other actors are engaged in modernizing the traditional flagellation ritual. Some religious communities independently organize blood donation actions as an alternative to the "useless" shedding of blood during *Muḥarram* rituals. A prominent Shiite reformist, Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, is one of the supporters of the change in the character of popular Shiite tradition. As the "Juma community" website states, this group, together with an organization "Islam Ittihad," has organized a program of blood donations for the child victims of thalassemia and hemophilia. A series of seminars on this topic were held with doctors, journalists and parents of sick children to promote volunteer principles and to encourage people to participate in the program. Such initiatives can be seen as the signs of civil society. But this example shows another interesting process. Ibrahimoglu's activities are politically opposing the actions of the *sheikh-ul-islam* and his people. Tense relations between the Juma community and the official Shia hierarchy are manifested in many ways. However, somehow indirectly their actions share some similarities. People's practices are always embedded in the context, in local problems, discourses, flows of ideas. They develop in interactions with the political and socio-cultural environment and cannot be judged independently.

The creative process of redefinition of Islam involves an adaptation of its public manifestations to the needs of a modern state. Thus, a religious official

strategy is to shape a base for the national model of Islamic religion and culture (Motika, 2001). This process is increasingly evident as strong nationalist feelings are on the increase in the post-Soviet states. In order to forge national Islam, Azerbaijani clergy oppose foreign missionaries and religious leaders educated abroad. The hierarchy wants to control and influence the ideas that are disseminated among Azeri people, which in the context of globalization and the Internet is a very tough task. As the *sheikh-ul-islam* has, at least in theory, control over the nomination of imams and *akhunds* of local mosques, he promotes people who strictly support his point of view. National Islam is supposed to have a definitely moderate and non-radical character. An idyllic image that the sheikh and his people promote stresses religious tolerance and a peaceful life of Muslims in a secular, democratic country. This perspective is shared by the state authorities. Islam, in a national form, is understood as a part of heritage, that has positively contributed to the development of Azerbaijani nation and culture (Atayev, 2002). Presidents publicly show their attachment to Islam. Heydar Aliyev, for instance, went on the hajj and used to visit mosques during religious holidays. His son, who is in power since his father's death in 2003, continues such policy. Generally, common interests in shaping the Azerbaijani version of Islamic culture between official spiritual leaders and the state representatives predominate.

Alternative propositions of Islamic modernism come from a group of contemporary Azerbaijani intellectuals. The most well-known are: Rafiq Aliyev (an orientalist, a director of the Center for Islamic Studies *IRSHAD*, and the former chairman of the State Committee of Azerbaijan Republic for Work with Religious Associations), Nariman Qasimoglu (an Arabist, translator of the Koran into Azeri, and the director of the Azerbaijan Center for Religion and Democracy), or Fazil Qazanfaroglu (Motika, 2001). Although their postulates differ, they nevertheless share some common values and ideas. The most noticeable is the critical attitude towards the non-intellectual popular Islamic tradition, in which religious and national customs overlap. A lot of Muslim intellectuals do not support Shiism, but favour a Sunni "moderate" branch. Moderate here implies an opposition to any kind of religious extremism. They are against any strictness of rituals, unreflective following of religious rulings, or blind obedience to a religious leader. For them faith is more important than religion with all its precise requirements. In the interview I had with Nariman Qasimoglu I asked about the problem of reform in religion. The Arabist has underlined that a Muslim should rely only on the Koran. The Hadith body of literature must be rejected, or set aside, but not considered as a part of Islam. If the Koran stated somewhere that additional sources of religion were needed, it would be different, he argues. In such statements, he distances himself from not only the Shia but also the mainstream Sunni tradition. In his model of religion, the Koran contains answers

to all kind of problems and questions. In this sense, he said, the Koran is modern; it is the book that serves people in every century. Regarding the folk Islam, the scholar remarked:

> There is no need for any kind of mediation between God and people. I preach reform ideas. I say that saints and other mediators are of no use for religious people. We have to depart from this way. This is not religion. The role of clergy and their khutbas is negligible. Rituals have little significance for God. They are important only for traditional Muslims.

An Azeri liberal pro-democratic activist Hikmet Haji-zadeh in our conversation presented his view on religion as being divided into two spheres: (1) religious rituals and celebrations, and (2) an agreement between God and people, according to which salvation can be achieved after death only if a believer follows general moral rules, i.e., he does not kill others; refrains from doing evil; acts in a just way. This scheme of thinking resembles an older approach to religion of Immanuel Kant: religion as cult (prayers, offerings, fasting, etc.) and as moral action (commanding people to make a change in their lives). It seems that the contemporary Muslim independent elite in Azerbaijan, regardless their personal attitudes towards specific Islamic regulations of the sharia, puts an emphasis on the second understanding. They promote a more ethical and reflexive reading of Islamic Scriptures and put an emphasis on ethical standards. A religious person shall be, first of all, engaged in moral transformation and improvement, obviously in the framework of cultural norms and values.

It is conceivable that, in the future, propositions formulated by Muslim intellectuals will gain more publicity and popularity in the society. A couple of religious people I talked to mentioned some of the local scholars as having some impact, especially in regard to translation of Islamic literature into Azeri or Russian. Sometimes an alliance with the state serves as an effective channel of putting one's ideas into work, as it was the case of Rafiq Aliyev during his presidency over a new institution founded by state authorities in order to exercise control over religious communities. Another prominent orientalist Elmir Kuliyev has called for transparency in the activity of religious communities. Yet, for today, apart from few exceptions, the Azerbaijani Muslim elite does not have enough power to compete with religious leaders from abroad. The Azeri believers are more inclined to search for inspiration and spiritual guidance outside Azerbaijan, especially among the "international Islamic stars," from the past (such as Ibn Taymiyyah [b. 1263 AD]), as well as from our times (such as Adnan Oktar, known by his pen name as Harun Yahya (b. 1956). Their ideas, which will be presented later, are among the most well-known and influential in the contemporary religious discourse in Baku.

Conclusion

After the Soviet atheistic repressions of religion finally came to an end, religious traditions entered into intense competition with each other as well as with alternative ideological systems. Already in the late 1980s first symptoms of Islamic revival appeared, although they were not the focus of the main research interests. Gradually, however, the international Islamic discourse and activities rooted in the Azerbaijani society and became a hot and controversial public issue. This chapter presented short characteristics of the main Islamic branches and actors that compete with each other over their interpretation of Islamic ideas and concepts. This religious revival encompasses on the one side religious branches that for a long time had been typical of the Azerbaijani context, on the other—some new branches that are taking roots in this country for the first time in its history (e. g. Salafism). Although Azerbaijan has always been a place of religious diversity attracting various sects and missionaries, contemporary pluralism has some novel features that resemble the international trends observed also in other corners of the world. Global Islamic movements—with their cosmopolitan appeal and huge financial and institutional resources—are at the same time raising doubts and protests from the conservative parts of the Azerbaijani society, and are attracting increasing groups of people to take on a "religious path." The next chapters will consider this issue of religious pluralism from another perspective. I will try to show how do ordinary people handle this sudden religious diversity, how they respond to the challenges of religious pluralism. What are the factors that make a particular Islamic tradition more attractive than others? And, for whom is a given religious model appealing? How does the process of interaction between religious interpreters and the faithful develop? Ultimately, the question is—how is religion (in its diverse manifestations) shaped and constantly modified in the negotiations between various actors who are situated in a specific context? I will also touch the issue of the possible outcomes of this inter-religious competition. If the Islamic revival continues, religious leaders, preachers, and activists will have more influence on society, mainly on the younger generation looking for guidance in life. It will have unpredictable implications on all aspects of social life—on social norms and values, on gender relations and the role of women, on aspirations of the youth and their career paths. It will also influence state policies, both internal and in foreign relations. Thus, it is fascinating to observe this process from various perspectives to see who is likely to win this battle of ideas.

Chapter 6
Choosing Religion: Strategies and Discourses

In the 1990s in the Caucasus and Central Asia an acute feeling of longing for spirituality was widespread. Regardless of previous religious experience in family circles, people began to explore new possibilities in the religious sphere. Traditional religiosity associated with rituals and "part-time" religious engagement of "cultural Islam" ceased to be sufficient for many. People eagerly turned to new religious sources: novel print and electronic publications, missionaries and their khutbas, religious TV channels as well as attractive TV serials or Islamic radio stations. New possibilities emerged for those willing to travel abroad to get in touch with Muslims from other countries. Scholarships were offered for local youth to study theology in Arab countries, Turkey or Iran.

Contrary to what many social scientists had assumed, this outburst of religious pluralism did not lead to confusion and scepticism, but to a visible rise in religiosity. Religious alternatives did not pose a danger to Islam, but instead led to more religious awareness. This chapter will elaborate on the processes related to modern pluralism in the postsocialist context. It is very interesting to observe how people are trying, in different ways, to find their paths in life, and to take advantage of opportunities brought by globalization. In Baku I was particularly looking into various types of strategies that people employ in dealing with competing religious options, competing worldviews and identities proposed by the main religious branches. Which religious option is attractive for whom, and why is it so? What makes certain religious practices and obligations appealing to people in the current context? What kind of factors influence religious choices? What are the discourses related to being a Muslim and how are they mutually intertwined? These are some of the questions that I was posing to myself when I was exploring Islamic diversity in Baku and talking to "religious Muslims" or religious leaders as well as during my visits in mosques or pirs.

6.1 Pluralism and Religiousness: The Peculiarity of Azerbaijan

An increase in options available for believers or potential believers that began on a large scale after the fall of the Soviet Union has occurred simultaneously with an unexpected religious growth, often referred to as a religious revival. Is it a coincidence, or is pluralism in the religious sphere positively associated with religiosity? It has been a hot issue in the sociology of religion for a few decades.

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While there are a lot of theoretical arguments on both sides, empirical analyses are more scarce. In this chapter, I will present some practices that hopefully will provide some insight into mechanisms that mediate between pluralism and religious engagement.

The coexistence of diverse Islamic models means more choices for people, not more threats. In such social environments, it is much easier to choose and follow a religious tradition that responds to one's background, needs, interests, and aspirations. Therefore, more people engage in religious life than it would be in a monopolistic situation, which is less sensitive to socio-cultural and economic diversity. The second factor that influences religiosity is that a choice made among many alternatives requires justification and a polemical attitude. To be able to defend one's decisions, people look for more knowledge and arguments and often have to prove their rightness by appropriate religious behavior. They also have more opportunities for discussing their views, as they are being constantly challenged by others. Apart from this, under the impact of a pluralistic situation Islamic culture experiences inner changes, such as innovations and adaptation of religious traditions to a new context. During my fieldwork, I have identified two types of competition involving religious actors. The first type is a competition between religions and secular ideologies. The second is a struggle with other participants of religious market, no matter whether they represent the same religion (in this case Islam), or different. Analysing the case of Azerbaijan, I mostly concentrate on the intra-religious market, consisting of a variety of Islamic traditions, as the inter-religious competition is at a negligible level at present.

The observation of basic processes in the Caucasus, which my own research confirms, leads to a conclusion that the prediction of the market theory of religion in that specific context is right, but the factors postulated by the model do not explain religiosity in Azerbaijan correctly. On the one hand, an increase in options available to believers, that began after the fall of the Soviet Union, has occurred simultaneously with religious growth, as the theory predicts. On the other hand, political restrictions have not diminished religious fervour, which is against the theoretical explanation. For that reason, I will discuss here the particularities of Azerbaijan that can account for the religious revival.

The first significant feature of pluralism in Azerbaijan, which makes it distinctly different from a well-researched North American case, is its sudden and recent reappearance. The long era of communist repressions and restrictions directed against religious expression did not end with a victory of scientific atheism and agnosticism. When Azerbaijanis entered an epoch of political upheavals, in a short period of time religious public activities became visible. The rapidity of this change certainly influenced the process of religious revival in

the society. Although its thorough analysis is beyond the scope of this book, some aspects which directly influence people's choices will be discussed later. I will only signal here the problem of religious authority. The isolation of Muslim societies in the Soviet empire from religious centres had disastrous consequences for Islamic knowledge among average Muslims as well as among those who were regarded as religious specialists. The lack of native erudite scholars or other knowledgeable people that could become respected religious leaders in the 21st century made people searching for Islam turn towards foreign experts. This demand for "true" religious knowledge enabled foreign missionaries to enter into competition with the local Azerbaijani clergy.

Another difference between America and Azerbaijan concerning pluralism is the issue of freedom. Azerbaijani constitution nominally guarantees democracy, strict separation between religion and state, and freedom of religion. Similar situation is in other newly independent republics in Central Asia. According to Article 48 of the Azeri constitution, freedom of conscience belongs to the basic rights of citizens of Azerbaijan:

1. Everyone enjoys the freedom of conscience.
2. Everyone has the right to define his/her attitude to religion, to profess, individually or together with others, any religion or to profess no religion, to express and spread one's beliefs concerning religion.
3. Everyone is free to carry out religious rituals, however this should not violate public order and contradict public morals.
4. Religious beliefs and convictions do not excuse infringements of the law.

The formal rules concerning freedom of choice are often evoked by state officials who claim that Azerbaijan is a democratic country with a strict separation between religion and state. Nonetheless, in spite of formal secularism, two official institutions, the Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB) and the State Committee for Work with Religious Organizations (SCWRO), constantly engage in controlling and regulating religious activities in the country. The process of implementation of religious regulations, which follows the initial period of freedom for all kinds of religious activists, characterizes not only Azerbaijan, but most post-Soviet countries. As a result, state governors manage to shape the religious situation by favouring and supporting certain forms of religion over others. Although regulations take different forms in particular republics, the trend is clear—to promote religious branches and groups that are willing to cooperate with the state, or at least to keep their activities out of the political arena. This problem will be discussed in more details in the chapter devoted to state's responses to pluralism. Here, the key issue is the fact that changes in the level of religious freedom over the last twenty years have not lessened religious engagement in

the society. Survey data from the region show more or less a continuous rise in the number of actively religious people, despite new forms of interference on the part of state authorities. Since this observation is at odds with the economic model of religious activity, which predicts that religiosity grows when there are no regulations of religious sphere, it deserves some more attention.

What else might account for the positive relationship between pluralism and religious vitality? I would argue that an important factor is the diversity of options proposed by religious traditions belonging to one religion. The major competition in Azerbaijan is not between Islam and other religions, but between groups representing different Islamic brands. The appeal of Islam is more acceptable to a society which for centuries was attached to that religion and cultivates the collective memory around the notion of Muslim traditions. Even if the self-identification as a Muslim person does not imply any religious activity nor any knowledge of religious prescriptions, the fact that Islamic groups evoke recognizable symbols is persuasive to the Azerbaijani society. For people who actively seek religion it is easier to identify themselves with traditions of their ancestors, although often in a new version (as "true," or "real" Islam). On the other hand, the array of ideas and symbols associated with different Islamic groups is so wide that a real competition emerges. The fight is even more intense because every religious community has to find a way to justify its superiority over other propositions. Chaves and Gorsky (2001, p. 277) have even proposed a hypothesis that more sociologically adequate understanding of competition in the religious field would involve a recognition that there may be more competition among groups within one denomination than there is across denominations. My observations support this suggestion. An ideological fight among Islamic sects all over the post-Soviet space is very intense indeed, and, in Azerbaijan, more people change affiliation within Islam (e. g., from Shiism to Sunnism or vice-versa) than between religions.

Another factor that enhances the level of competition, and thus increases levels of religious participation is the challenge of a "powerful religious competitor—the doctrine of scientific atheism" (Froese, 2004, p. 65). In this struggle, religions could not ignore "scientific" arguments, and thus some religious groups incorporated a clear discourse about the compatibility between modern science and religion to refute atheists' attacks. In the ongoing process of transformation, some Islamic traditions succeed in creating an image of modern religious ideology that is attractive to many young, educated, urban segments of the society. A habitus of "modern and religious Muslim man" is an ideal of many people from Baku with whom I spoke.

Finally, the public discourse on religious pluralism has additionally contributed to the rapidly growing interest in religious issues. The constant media cov-

erage of the threat of religious radicalism, that has intensified in the last few years, makes people more aware of the divisions functioning among Muslims. A similar process, but in Italy, has been analysed by Introvigne (2005, p. 2). They have noticed a seemingly surprising fact—the lack of real pluralism on the religious market ("theoretical pluralism") did not coincide with religious decline. Since 1980s, a growth in religious attendance has been observed, despite the fact that "all religions other than the Roman Catholic Church account for only 1.9 percent of Italian citizens." The solution to the "Italian puzzle" was a hypothesis that perceived pluralism does have similar effects to empirical one. Changes in the Italian religious field were correlated with a new legislation on religion and a dramatic rise in the number of immigrants, mostly Muslims. Terrorists attacks in 2001 and Oriana Fallaci's bestsellers popularized a mass feelings of the "Muslim threat." All these events led to vivid debates on political and cultural aspects of religious diversity and might have had an impact on religious participation.

6.2 From Fate to Choice

> For pre-modern man, heresy is a possibility—usually a rather remote one; for modern man, heresy typically becomes a necessity (Berger, 1979, p. 28).

Living for most of my life in Catholic Poland, where most people either keep attachment to their parents' religion or choose not to have any religion at all, I was struck by the extent of "religious mobility" that is clearly apparent in Azerbaijan and elsewhere in post-socialist Central Asia. The word "choice" was one of the most frequent in declarations of being an active Muslims. It refers, in most cases, to choosing one of the Islamic traditions. Abandoning religion occurs in practice very seldom. It stands in a stark contrast to my home country where, over the last years, I have heard more about Polish people converting to Islam than about believers changing an affiliation inside the Christian church. This observation of a variety of responses to religious pluralism has induced me to engage in the study of diversity in contemporary Muslim societies.

Studies of the major religions are conducted at various levels: the global level, the state (or national) level, the community level (e. g., a *mahalla*, parish or a group concentrated around a pir), or, increasingly, at the level of an individual. All of them are essential to gain more knowledge and understanding of a religious change. The individual level's analyses are often questioned, mainly in regard to social psychologists' claims that people do not make decisions solely on a rational basis. But, no matter whether people make their decisions in a ra-

tional or non-rational way, an understanding of how they make up their minds can help us discover some mechanisms involved in the process of changes in religion. It is also very interesting to find out what kinds of factors contribute to people's choices. How do people perceive and judge the religious situation? Are they aware of the possibilities that exist when they make up their minds? How do they value the option they chose and the alternatives? Does religious pluralism undermine the certainty of choice, as some theorists have argued? Last but not least, how does religious diversity, from the perspective of believers, influence the religious landscape? These are some of the questions that will be dealt with in the next sections.

Tradition Taken for Granted

Peter Berger has frequently advocated a view that a situation of pluralism changes the extent of human experience. In Azerbaijan, the recent appearance of options was so sudden that the processes of choosing (including changing) one's religion or religious tradition are highly recognizable. The emergence of a new religious market and intra-religious competition was, at the same time, unexpected and rapid. Suddenly, Shiite and Sunni traditions which had been taken for granted for generations, ceased to be the only alternatives. Although not much is known about conversions between those two branches in the Soviet era, the secularization of both traditions, alongside an extraordinary for the Muslim world weakening of intra-religious differences, allows us to assume that the competition was not distinguishable. If so, people were not encouraged to change religious affiliation. They did not have incentives nor external impulses to think their traditional rituals over. Even marriages between Sunnis and Shiites did not influence people's choices to a large degree.

When I asked people about their ways to religion, they usually responded that one of the sources for them was their ancestors' tradition. One middle-aged man explained: "The basis for us, for our interest in Islam, was the tradition of our fathers and grandfathers that we followed since childhood." Generally, as I observed, an emphasis on family as a basic channel for transferring values, customs, norms is still very strong. My religious friends and respondents used to underline that their ancestors were either Shia or Sunni, but in the "ethnic sense": they were Muslims just for the sole reason of being born in such a family. The upbringing and socialization into one of these traditions was thus taken for granted, and not challenged. Certain differences visible in ritual matters did not disturb anyone, despite the fact that both groups often prayed in the same mosques. A girl in the focus group claimed that the Shia-Sunni divi-

sions did not matter in the past: "Azerbaijan is historically a place of mixture of Shiism and Sunnism. There were marriages between both groups, and no problems resulted from it." Traditional Islam, with its more ritualistic sphere, was transmitted from generation to generation. "Shiites have always lived alongside Sunnis. It was our tradition. At times, one groups dominated, at times the second. During communism there was an atheistic ideology, but people did not completely lose their faith and handed it down to their children," another man stated in a group discussion. I also discussed the issue of religiously-mixed marriages with an Azeri German teacher. She assured me that in her country people tolerate such relationships, and gave me an example from her own family: a Muslim-Jewish marriage. When I asked her how do they get along with religious differences, she said that they attend a synagogue as well as a mosque. They try to reconcile their beliefs and find a common platform, but at the same time appreciate each other's religious differences.

In chapter one I discussed historical developments of the Islamic field in the region. I pointed to some periods where discrimination or persecutions forced people to change or hide their religious preferences. It is a baffling issue that most Muslims nowadays are not aware, or do not want to be aware, of these facts, and paint a picture of Azerbaijan as a country where tolerance was always one of its main features. The rhetoric of a glorious and tolerant past is very common. Nevertheless, it may be assumed that one cannot speak of free choice in the Azerbaijani past (as it is the case of most of the world). In Soviet times still most of the people who regarded themselves as Muslims did not question their inherited tradition. Only a few of my respondents gave me examples from their close family circles of changes in one's religious affiliation, which was usually associated with marriage (e. g., a grandmother was a Sunni, and parents were Shia).

6.3 Choosing Religion

With the advent of religious pluralism in Azerbaijan, the act of choice became a necessity. Even staying close to the religion of one's ancestors became a matter of personal decision. Before a person settles the problem of which trend in religion to follow, he has to deal with a more basic question: Why to follow religion at all? Although so far I have referred to the competition between religious traditions, additionally I have to tackle an equally important issue of competing religious and secular world views.

In the book "A Theory of Religion," Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge (1996) identify two cultural systems that pose a threat to religion's infallibility.

Politics and science continue to compete with religion by undermining or criticizing its explanations. In a cosmopolitan society a free and intense exchange of opinions, ideas, and explanations have become commonplace. Peter Berger (1967) gives additional examples of powerful competitors that struggle to distract people from religion. In his view, a religious worldview is being attacked by various secular explanations, some of which are highly organized (e. g., revolutionary ideologies, nationalist movements), some are more institutionally diffused (e. g., a doctrine of individualism or sexual emancipation). Therefore, pluralism, in a wider, non-religious sense, presents people with religion as only one of many, partially alternative, world views. In the Soviet Union one of the most dominant secular proposition was the doctrine of scientific atheism, which directly attacked religious beliefs. For many people it became an attractive alternative. "[T]he doctrine of atheism held a monopoly status within the Soviet religious economy through state repression of its ideological competitors and continued government funding of its promotion" (Froese, 2004, p. 65).

Social research on religiosity in Azerbaijan clearly shows that nowadays the number of self-declared atheists is almost negligible (Wiktor-Mach, 2012). It is however worth noting that even the non-believers identify themselves with the Islamic cultural area. Communist propaganda did not succeed in shaping a nation of *homo Sovieticus* for whom religion equals ignorance, superstitions and the Dark Ages. Despite the fact that the impact of atheism on beliefs and practices related to religion has been considerable, the doctrine itself is vigorously rejected. As many people underline, atheism does not suit the Azerbaijani culture. There is a positive image of modern Turkey, where, in spite of kemalist ideology, religiosity is much higher than in Azerbaijan. Prosperous Arab countries also add arguments in favour of modernization compatible with Islam. Similarly, political claims are not serious alternatives to religion for at least two reasons. Official separation of religion and state does not prevent the president nor the government from presenting (their model of) Islamic religion in a positive light. Religion in public statements of state officials is not treated as a competitor, but as a constructive force integrating society. People are encouraged to feel pride in their Islamic heritage. Religion is not presented as *the opium of the people* or a ballast in the country's modernization efforts. The second reason explaining the reasons why people do not view politics as an alternative to religion is the lack of efficient democracy. There is a general sense of disillusion with politics, enforced by human rights violations and attacks on opposition. In fact, what pious traditions in Azerbaijan propose to people is a decisive break with a political sphere. Morality and self-improvement are in the focus of religious activities.

The ideological secular world views that seem to really matter for Azerbaijanis, at least in Baku, are nationalism and scientific outlook. It is very interesting to observe that religious people do not have problems with integrating both perspectives with religion. Nationalistic sentiments, which increased in the independence era, are not considered as an alternative to religion. For an average Azerbaijani, Islamic religion is an integral part of their national heritage, customs, values, and norms. Some of them even justify their choice of being a religious person by saying that they belong to a Muslim nation. It is also part of the state's strategy to promote itself as a bridge between the East and the West. State authorities have turned their attention towards Muslim countries. The main strategic partner is Turkey, and the ideology of pan-Turkism has found a fertile ground in the Azerbaijani society. In spite of the fact that these ideas focus on common ethnic similarities of the Turkic nations, they do not exclude religious links. On the contrary, many pro-Turkish Azerbaijanis follow Islam in the interpretation of Turkish imams and scholars. They visit Turkish mosques, go to Turkey for study, work or holiday and socialize with Turkish friends. Turkish Islam is a natural choice for them.

The Miracles of the Koran

Turkish influence also plays a role in managing tensions between religion and science. In Western academic writings, it is usually assumed that there is a basic epistemological conflict between those two spheres. It was, therefore, surprising for me to discover that the discourse on religion in Azerbaijan quite openly stresses the opposite. A lot of people I talked to mentioned an extremely popular idea that the Koran includes all the facts about the world that modern sciences are discovering step by step. This scientific rhetoric has been promoted by the world-famous Turkish thinker Adnan Oktar, known widely as Harun Yahya, whose book "The Miracles of the Koran" is a bestseller in Baku. Yahya is admired for his "scientific" approach and for "proving" how logical and rational the Holy Koran and its vision is. Even people who do not visit Turkish mosques have heard about the content of the book. On his website, Yahya claims that in December 2008, around 3 thousand Azeri students in 24 schools participated in a series of his lectures. His ideological message contained in the illustrated "Atlas of Creation" was promoted at universities and libraries. In Yahya's view, these events were extremely successful and showed a genuine interest of the Azeri youth in the Koranic science (Azerbaijan Conferences Series).

It became a fashion to spread the incredible stories that were for such a long time hidden in the Koran but now are gradually revealed due to modern scien-

tific discoveries. An engineer from Baku expressed this attitude in the following words:

> Science is a great thing. It explains the material world surrounding us, but also brightens the meanings of our Holy Book. In the sacred Koran there is still a lot of things hidden from us, things beyond our grasp, but science will help us solve the mysteries.

Then he argued that Yahya's discoveries bring an important lesson: education and science are imperatives for Muslims. It is a task of a believer to devote one's life to study the world and its secrets. In his free time he eagerly reads popular science news and books.

Harun Yahya's popularity has been a surprise for many observers. He belongs to a new kind of religious entrepreneurs who are successfully making use of the internet and new media as tools of proselytism. His CV suggests that his educational background is not related directly to Islamic theology. In the 1970s Yahya undertook studies in architecture, but later changed to philosophy. His early career was not spectacular. In Istanbul, his sermons did not attract attention. Nevertheless, this experience and readings enabled him to develop his ideas that were focused on four main topics: 1. Creationism, i.e. denying Darwin's theory of evolution, 2. Eschatology, 3. Conspiracy theories (particularly directed against Jews and "masons"), 4. neo-Ottomanism. His ideas were not original. For instance, the arguments against Darwin's theory were taken from the Nurcu movement, which joined the efforts of Christian creationists in the West. However, it was Harun Yahya who was successful in spreading this ideology in the Islamic world. In the last decade, after discovering online communication, he set out on a successful project of reaching the audience beyond his homeland. He is the founder of the Science Research Foundation. His websites with his writings are translated into many languages (including Russian, Arabic, as well as English, German and French to target migrant Muslims living in Europe), often with the help of volunteers. He has also a strong interest in Central Asia and Caucasia, but so far it seems that his influence in that region is the strongest in Azerbaijan. The Azeri website with Yahya's texts, audio recordings and video materials (i.e., documentary films) is one of the richest and most dynamic. It includes numerous materials available to read or download free of charge (Riexinger, 2008).

I once met a young Muslim graduate, who wanted to convince me—an "outsider"—that the Koran is the most perfect of all holy scriptures. The first thing he encouraged me to do was watch a series of DVDs entitled "Scientific Miracles of the Koran" produced on the basis of Oktar's most famous publication. The movies he gave me presented stories of some selected Koranic secrets revealed in

modern times, such as the black holes, the ozone layer, the development of a human foetus, or the formation of the universe. Even the Big Bang Theory is included in the Koran, according to the Turkish writer. When I discussed these movies with my friend, he expressed his view that religion invites people to engage in science, and that particularly Islam calls people to study the world. It is the most intellectual religious tradition of all. Science cannot exist without religion, since both nature and scientific tools have been given to us by Allah himself. My friend added:

> Two types of people should be avoided because they pose the greatest threat to religion. The first type consists of people who don't know anything about the world and are totally ignorant of science. Such social environment is conducive to fanaticism. The second type encompasses those who devote themselves to science and forget about God. They are able to build atomic bombs and act against God and human beings. Science is extremely important in religion. But it is not and cannot be separated from God.

I entered into a polemic with him, stating the opposite. Religion, I argued, relates to an unknown sphere that cannot be understood rationally. How can we have a full knowledge of God? He is a mystery for people, which our minds cannot grasp. Science is an attempt to understand some aspects of the world and some rules behind it, but scientific thinking is not identical to religious thinking. He answered by pointing again to the Turkish writer: "It is Harun Yahya that made us aware that religion and science constitute a perfect unity." I have heard such statements many times from people in their twenties, mainly from students. I have heard them from religious and cultural Muslims alike. It was much tougher for me to find Darwin's supporters in Baku than those who are fascinated by Yahya's "discoveries."

Two people independently told me a story of a conversion to Islam, which resulted from a discovery that "religion is science." They shared with me the same history of a French oceanographer, Jacque Cousteau, who researched into the strait of Gibraltar, where waters of the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea meet. He allegedly discovered a surprising phenomenon, which according to him, had not been explained neither by physics nor chemistry nor any other science. At one place, there are two levels of water that do not mix with each other, as if they were separated by an invisible border, which enables both sides to keep their properties. After the shocking discovery for which he could not have given any rational explanation, the scholar was shown the following ayat from the Koran (The Holy Qurʾan):

> He has made the two seas to flow freely (so that) they meet together: Between them is a barrier which they cannot pass (55: 19 – 20).

When the researcher realized that this fact was revealed 1400 years back to Prophet Muhammad, according to the story, he started to believe and accepted Islam. This story alongside with other accounts (proven or not) of statesmen, celebrities or scholars who converted to the Islamic religion is very popular among Muslims, especially among the younger generation. Such examples give them arguments in favour of Islam's superiority over other religions, which they eagerly use.

Apparently, a lot of intelligent design ideologues share the same tenants as active atheists: the empirical reality provides evidence for (or against) God's existence. Creationists' books are full of detailed accounts of empirical "facts" which are supposed to support their vision. The popularity of Harun Yahya and his writings in the post-Soviet states are partially due to the legacy of communism and the scientific materialistic worldview it propagated. But he may have also benefited from the Muslims willingness to counter the growing Islamophobia and the popular mass media Western image of Islam. Muslims want to feel pride in their traditions but cannot ignore common stereotypes presenting their religion as irrational and radical.

In the context of Azerbaijan, science and its explanations do not constitute a real threat to religious beliefs in the supernatural world. The most common rhetoric underlines the advantages of Islam and its Holy Book over science, but also points to complementary roles of both systems. Religion encourages people to engage in studies and learning, and promotes those who strive to understand the world. On the other hand, science is believed to be able to provide proof of religious ideas and clarify some vague expressions typical of religious scriptures. "We need to respect and study science to learn how God has created the world. Science can show us the greatness of God. I love discussing molecular biology, chemistry, physics," a young Salafi told me. In this way, science has been removed from the intellectual and ideological set of alternatives to religious explanations. In fact, it is well integrated into religious discourse. This man also mentioned his own discovery in the Scripture. Once, he told me, a scientist explained him that in mathematics there is a system consisting only of two numbers: zero and one. Then, while reading the Koran, this young Muslim found out a "fascinating fact": the same rule applies to Islamic Holy Book: God himself says that either something exists or not, there is nothing in-between, no other possibility. That would mean, he carried on, that the Koran contains higher mathematics. Science is the Holy Book's underlying principle. Thus, since the Prophet was uneducated, he could not have written the Koran alone. It is then another argument that rationally supports the reality of Allah and the religion he created. Such arguments are appealing to the youth who seeks certainty in our chaotic and rapidly changing world.

Becoming a Convert

A question remains, how do people usually find their way towards religious beliefs and engagement? Before we analyse the competition process, which enhances intensification of religious feelings, let us introduce a perspective of people who try in their own words to explain their reasons to "embrace" religion and the particular strategies they apply in dealing with pluralism. I explicitly use the term "embrace," because the process of religious revival in post-Soviet societies resembles cases of new coverts in any religion. In this context, embracing religion does not mean that a person began to believe in God, since most of them believed even before. It does refer to a situation when a believing person turns to more active religious practice and makes an effort to live according to religious requirements. As anthropological inquiries into conversion show, it is not a simple act, but a process which is not a 0 – 1 choice. One of the contemporary ethnographers of post-socialism—Catherine Wanner (2004)—conducted research among Baptist, Pentecostal and Charismatic missionaries and believers in Ukraine which confirm that converting to another faith entails a large degree of creative adjustments and decisions. The need to embed one's life in a particular context leads to many hybrid forms of practicing and understanding religion. It suggests that a convert's religious worldview will not share only similarities with other members of his new community and more generally with the transnational "brothers and sisters."

The phenomenon of conversion[1] from a secular to a religious Muslim is clearly visible in a comparison between Azerbaijani Muslims and Muslims who were born in societies without the experience of atheistic propaganda. I had a few conversations on religious topics with students in Baku who came from Kashmir, Pakistan and Bangladesh. All of them were brought up in religious surroundings. They learned Islamic religion gradually, from parents, teachers, and from other members of society since they were born. For them religion was taken for granted, even though they had an experience of frequent discussions on religious questions. By contrast, the majority of Azerbaijanis are socialized into some common religious rites in their families. This basic secular form of Islam with occasional religious practices and celebrations as well as superficial knowledge of Islam is discarded and vigorously rejected by religious people. They usually can point to a period in their life when they broke with the tradition

1 I'm using the term "conversion" in the context of new pious Muslims, but I'm aware of the controversies surrounding it. A short but insightful discussion of the term's connotations in the context of post-Soviet studies can be found at Pelkmans (2009, pp. 11–13).

of being only "ethnic" or "theoretical" Muslims. It was their conscious choice, they underline, although influenced by various factors.

Two themes dominate the stories that people told me about choosing a more devout way of life. One I would call a communal choice, the other—individual. The former theme revolves around the massive process of religious revival that intensified in the early 1990s. Mostly people in their middle-ages situated their own experience in a historical context. Unlike the younger generation, older people experienced communism and remembered closed mosques and anti-religious atmosphere. They used to say that there was an ideological vacuum after the end of communism. On the other hand, as they constantly stressed, Soviets did not manage to eradicate the faith. The demand for religion that remained constant throughout communism enabled the future "return" to Islam. A director of a NGO gathering believing women explained this process in the following words:

> After the end of communism, first translations of the Koran appeared. Before, people had been aware that there exists a Sacred Book, but nobody knew it. When I have read it for the first time, it was like a bolt from the blue. Wonderful! Amazing! Lots of various books about religion were published, many organizations began to function. People engaged in humanitarian aid were coming from abroad and brought us books and materials about Islam. We were thirsty for information and absorbed everything we got. We wanted to comprehend our religion.

Another woman added that there was a real hunger for religion and celebrations. What was concealed during the USSR, appeared later in public with huge power. Religion has always been present, she reassured. Even communists revealed their attachment to religion when they were at home. A practicing Muslim scholar, while talking about his way to Islam, said that his first contact with religion was at home. Even though his father was a communist, he attended mosque and celebrated all major Muslim holidays. In his view, people were allowed to follow religion, but communists had it tougher.

Stories of the younger generation are usually more focused on personal experience, which they describe as individual and unique. They do not relate their choices to macro-scale socio-cultural processes. One pattern that emerges from their stories is a reflection upon the way that finally led to choosing to become a "real" Muslim. They pointed to a period in their lives when questions about existence and a sense of life appeared. Personal needs, hesitations, problems in life encouraged people to look for religion. According to a young woman from the Juma community, without sincere and serious spiritual needs nobody can really embrace religion. She told me a story of her sister whom she encouraged to attend weekly discussions on religious topics. The sister came once, listened to a

lecture, and did not come back again. She did not have doubts nor questions. In a few years' time, however, she began to attend the meetings, but at that time it was her own decision.

A Salafi man in his twenties was not religious at all earlier. He had some affairs with girls, was in the "wrong" company. At one point in his life, unexpectedly, he realized that relationships he had with women were not right. It was a message from above, as he knows now. It was then, as he told me, that he started to look for information on morality and religion. All the time he had believed in God, but did not consider himself a Muslim or Christian. Troubles with women meant an impulse for him to look into the Koran for guidance. This case is also rather typical in regard to morality. Social problems are acute, and in Baku, like in many metropolises, they are widespread and visible at every corner. Alcohol abuse, drugs, divorces, to mention a few, call for moral revolution, as some pious Muslims say. They argue that only living according to the Koran will change the "spoilt" world.

Another detectable pattern of narrative refers to religious pluralism. Several of my respondents presented their way to religion as a process of getting familiar with various religions. Looking for information, reading books on Christianity and other religious traditions was a vital phase in their search. I have heard statements such as: "One must first know about many religions," "my friend searched for his way for a very long time, he compared different religious scriptures and religions, read everything he could find, he got familiar with Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and, after having learned everything, he decided to follow Islam. My way was exactly the same," or "I am ethnically Muslim by definition. But once I began to ask myself questions about existence, life, and all sorts of philosophical questions. I got into comparative religion and finally decided to follow Islam." There are cases of people who have not only read about other religions, but also practiced them. These examples show that there is a general spiritual search for meanings. There is a spiritual and ideological vacuum which many people feel and desperately look for a guidance. And, on the other hand, there are mullahs, akhunds and imams with university degrees in theology, there are books, journals and other kinds of materials, and —internet, which is becoming the most important written source of knowledge for urban youth.

Fatima, a woman in hijab who feels quite close to the Salafi community, told me her story of discovering her way to God. After I have clarified that I am a not a Muslim, but Christian, she surprisingly confessed that she had been Christian in the past. It was only one year ago that she began wearing a head cover. Her family is Muslim, but her husband comes from an Orthodox family. The marriage did not make her change religion automatically, since her husband is an atheist.

Nevertheless, she got interested in religion and soon was baptized. For some time the woman used to attend an Orthodox church and read a lot about Christian religion to know it thoroughly. But then some disappointments appeared culminating in a molestation of a boy by a clergyman that she witnessed (or at least, those are her words). Shocked by what she saw, the woman lost all her faith in the Christian Church and had to take antidepressants for two months. Afterwards Fatima decided to avoid any religious institution, and instead just to believe in God and pray to Him at home. At that time, however, she got interested in books on Islam. Having read several of them, she discovered that it is the right religion and made a choice to wear a hijab and make *namaz*.

The history of Fatima, as well as others who search for meaning in various religious traditions, but eventually find them in Islam, is quite emblematic. The act of "choosing" religion is not without consequences. It seems that people want to underline their independent and rational decision in clinging to Islam. They look for arguments they find around, on Islamic websites and in various booklets, which provide easy justification for preferring Islam over other faiths. They refer to stories that circulate in society. They are very cautious not to present themselves as religious fanatics or fundamentalists. Religious culture is embedded in social context, and having Muslim friends around makes Islam the most natural and most convenient choice. Friends, colleagues, families exert invisible pressure on those who do not follow the social norms, who want to be outside. Especially in Azerbaijan it's tougher to convert to other faiths also due to nationalistic pressures of the state that promotes Muslim identity as closely related to the ethnic one.

Becoming a practicing Muslim transforms one's social networks. Usually conversion results in a break-up with some friends or relatives who are not able to accept the choice and its implications. But conversion also entails entering into a new community. New friends, new opinion leaders, new authorities. This social side of religion is extremely important in people's motivations. In Baku, which is undergoing dramatic changes, the sense of economic and social instability is prevalent. The rate of urbanization is high and the capital is a magnet for attracting the rural population as well as people from smaller towns coming to study or searching for jobs. In the chaotic and scary urban life, the solace and support of religious community plays an important role. Religious networks are a kind of alternative circle of information flow and exchanges of services not only of religious nature. Finding a job is much easier when you have an extended network of friends. Borrowing money or other goods, exchanging services, providing support of various kinds is common among a community members. It seems more common than relying on state or market insti-

tutions. Mathijs Pelkmans' (2006, p. 42) account of Pentecostal Christians in contemporary Kyrgyzstan attests to the importance of social ties between believers in times of rapid social change. His respondents underlined an open, friendly and supportive atmosphere in their new community. They found people with similar problems and doubts whom they could trust. Trust is a scarce resource in post-Soviet republics.

Conversions from "nominal Islam" or atheism into becoming practicing Muslims take place in the whole postsocialist world. This kind of massive shift in religious identity happen usually when societies experience sudden and rapid changes, when old institutions fall down or are restructured, when new social networks are created. Migration flows and new communication technologies make the diffusion of religious ideas much easier. I have observed it among Tatars in Poland, Kists in Georgia, and, for a longer time, among Azeris. Some patterns are different, but the contrast between the "cultural" and "religious" Muslims is widespread. The presence of revivalist movements and much easier access to religious knowledge in the context of rapid transformations bring many people closer to Islam. In Central Europe, when the cold war ended all of the sudden with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Muslim Tatar communities faced enormous challenges. They have been experiencing a similar process of re-discovering Islam, alongside other elements of their culture and traditions. Re-establishing relations with Muslims from other countries, such as Lithuania, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey, Tatarstan or Arab countries, pushed many Polish Tatars towards more intense religiosity (Wiktor-Mach, 2008).

Stories of individual conversions in Central Asia have been collected by the team and collaborators of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in Halle. In 2003 – 2010 the Halle Focus Group researched the new role religion plays in post-communist societies. In the second phase of the comparative project the focus changed from the state and the public sphere perspective towards everyday life and transformation of social norms and values.[2] Working in different former Soviet Republics (Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Dagestan and the Russian Federation in Ingushetia), they managed to identify similar, recurrent themes and patterns related to the discovery of religion by individuals. They found a set of factors that have an impact on the process of religious revival, such as teachings of religious leaders and activists, new religious media,

2 The outline of the project, summary of its main contributors and the main findings can be found in *Religion, Identity, Postsocialism* (2010). Much of the work has also been turned into numerous articles and monographs.

transnational influences (Foszto, Hilgers, Pelkmans, McBrien, in *Religion, Identity, Postsocialism* (2010)).

Julie McBrien identified a surprising channel of the religious revival. In a little town of Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia at the turn of the millennium foreign soap operas contributed actively to building a positive image of a religious Muslim. The Brazilian *Clone* turned out to be an unexpected success and was the topic of street conversations. Its characters, Muslims from Morocco and Brazil, ignited discussions on everyday practices of Muslims. It did not matter too much that the images of Muslim life were stereotypical. It was the first time that a movie presented Muslims in an attractive light. For some Kyrgyz, the *Clone* became a point of reference in their discovery of Islam, even though the motives of the soap opera were far from religious and pious.

Hesitation

An appearance of new options on the religious landscape initiated a process of exchange of information between social actors of different religious traditions. For secular Muslims pluralism led to greater awareness of a variety of styles of religiosity. What are the consequences of such a process? In some cases, people incorporated some elements of different religious tradition into their basic religious identity. In other, an encounter with various options and an existing freedom of choice led people to embrace other models of Islam. Between those two practices, there is also a certain degree of hesitation brought about by religious competition. The choice is not always obvious and unproblematic.

Hafiza has been raised in a secular Muslim family. Soon after moving to Baku to study she became interested in pious forms of religiosity that she was observing around. Once she showed me a difference in wearing a traditional, loose veil that most Muslim women use in mosques and a hijab, which, as she assured, had not been seen in Azerbaijan in the past. Wearing hijab is more demanding and complex. She is aware of the fact that the concept of hijab includes covering the whole body, especially legs and arms. She said, “When I moved to Baku, I wanted to start making *namaz*. I even inquired about the rules, but after reflecting upon it, I have given up this idea.” Hafiza has a positive attitude towards pious Islamic practices (excluding extremist forms), but she wants to postpone the decision to follow religious rules. The reasons she gave to explain her choice were varied. First of all, she regards the pious model as extremely demanding and very different from her own tradition. It would require her to adjust her lifestyle, to follow very strict discipline. Pious life is extremely absorbing and challenging. Thus, a decision to become a religious person is a very serious one.

In her interpretation, once a person decides on becoming a practicing Muslim, he or she must follow that new path one hundred percent:

> If someone consciously begins to make *namaz*, he or she cannot pray only once a week. One must then pray five times a day, otherwise it is a sin. That's why, if I know that I will not be able to fulfil this requirement, I should not start. It is more proper not to make *namaz* than to do it occasionally. The same is with hijab. Once you make up your mind to wear it, you are obliged to carry it forever all the days. God understands people and demands from them what they are capable of doing.

The obligations of Islamic religion are, in her opinion, too tough for her as a student who is too busy with her work and everyday life. Even though there is a mosque near the university, she has lectures during prayer times. In the morning and evening she is too tired for additional duties. Moreover, even though Hafiza finds hijab to be a good way towards God, she does not find it fashionable. Fashion in the eyes of many Azerbaijani female students includes tight clothes, usually jeans or mini-skirts, a careful hairstyle, and strong make-up. It is a fashion shown on the Russian and Turkish TV channels, fashion promoted by actresses and models, one which secular Soviet propaganda preferred over visible religious dress code. But Hafiza expects that her preferences will change and she plans to start her active religious life later when she will be over 40 years old. Similar plans I repeatedly heard from girls in their teens in various places of the Caucasus. Apparently, religious outlook and behavior matches well with older age and more stabilization (family, work, etc.). Such image seems to correspond to the traditional notion of culture, in which older age is associated with prestige, deep knowledge, great respect and more religiosity.

Another argument Hafiza gives for not engaging yet in religion is her impression that people should get prepared to change religious style. In her social milieu there are too many people who appear pious, but are seen doing things that no Muslim should do. She gave some examples: "I have seen boys and girls [in veils] walking along hand in hand," "My colleague enjoys boasting about doing *namaz*. But it is forbidden to talk about it," or, "There are girls in hijab who eat sausages, but Muslims know that it is haram." Her conclusion was that, instead of joining a new path in religion, it is better to do it gradually, and take on visible Islamic symbols, such as hijab, only when one is sure about being ready for it. For now, the most important for her is to "be a good Muslim in her heart and towards other people." A "good Muslim" is not someone who performs *namaz*, but a person who believes in God and fulfils his commandments: does not drink alcohol, avoids haram food, does not kill, and is a moral person. She is also convinced that her husband must be Muslim (but, as she underlines, definitely not from Iran nor Afghanistan). At the same time, she continues to get

new information about the Islamic religion from more knowledgeable peers and teachers. It is not an active process. I have not seen her reading a book on religion, watching religious program nor talking to a religious expert. Sources of religious knowledge for her are pieces of information that flow around, in the classroom, in discussions.

Her family and close friends have a strong influence on her worldview. With the exception of a few active Muslim friends, most of the people in her social milieu are indifferent to religiosity, and some of them are even suspicious. Wearing a modern hijab is often treated as a symbol of a break-up with one's kin, especially in villages and smaller cities. It contradicts the existing notions of culture and religion and poses a threat to the social stability. In Azeri society family attachment is very strong and in tough economic times and crises, as it is now, family is seen as one of the most trusted sources of help and support. For young women, such as Hafiza, the danger of being left alone is too real and most do not dare to challenge their family ties. They know that in the case of misfortune, lack of work, divorce, or illness, family is the most trusted institution to turn to for help.

6.4 Choosing among Alternatives

According to social research and opinions of experts on religion, an increasing number of people in Azerbaijan have recently started to follow a religious path. They reframe their lives to make them consistent with Islamic ideals and formal regulations. One of the challenges they face is to handle the diversity of Islam. As I mentioned earlier, the basic division among Azerbaijani Muslims is neither Shia-Sunni-Sufi, nor traditional-modern. Above all, it is a division between Muslims oriented around religiousness that permeates all spheres of life on the one hand, and secular Muslims oriented around ethnic culture on the other. It is a division between Muslims studying the Koran and the hadiths and their interpretations to look for answers to their everyday questions and Muslims just keeping the Holy Book at home. The first group does *namaz* every day (or at least regularly), the second prays at special occasions (during life-cycle rituals, shrine visits, etc.).

Pious traditions, represented by various movements, groups, and leaders signal a drift in the direction of orthodoxy (understood in many ways). Therefore, the first symptom of pluralism noticeable by an average secular Muslim is an appearance of piety and its symbols in the public sphere. The first challenge for those ready to become more religiously observant is not the decision which model to follow but the subordination of the lifestyle to a religious paradigm.

This basic division between traditional and pious habitus was underlined by devout Muslims in our conversations and interviews (it was articulated as "theoretical," "ethnic," "cultural," "traditional" versus "practicing," "religious," "orthodox," "real" approach to religion). Pious Muslims acknowledged the dominance of the secular understanding of religion, but pointed to the empirical fact that the religious path they represent is gaining popularity.

This division has serious social implications. Muslims choosing the Islamic pious way from time to time encounter a feeling of resistance from the secular part of the society. Friends and families are first to judge. I heard such stories from many practicing Muslims, whose close relatives opposed their decision. This contradicts the common rhetoric of Azeris as people tolerant towards different religions. Most Azeri people I met claim to represent the most tolerant society of the world (especially in the Muslim world). I never experienced a sense of distrust or prejudice against my Christian background. I was repeatedly told that differences in religion do not really matter, as we worship the same God and strive to be morally "good" and helpful towards others. People often were hospitable and encouraging. The experiences of "new Muslims," or converts to Christianity are full of evidence of social pressure and negative attitudes and prejudices. There are cases when a family breaks ties with such a person. Sometimes a family accepts the choice after seeing that religion brings positive changes in one's life. One Shia girl said that her parents were afraid that a hijab would mean an isolation from the world. They held a stereotype of a veiled women as being subordinate to men in all respects and deprived of free will. They were afraid she would withdraw from life and lose all her ambitions. She was courageous enough to act against her family's will. And she won. Her parents saw her enthusiasm, engagement in education and social life that followed her choice and stopped with their objections. Religion pushed her towards making a real effort to study. In Islam she heard a call for education and constant improvement. In a veil, as she confessed, she feels more emancipated. A phrase that seems like a paradox for most non-Muslims. When talking to men, she feels more courageous because they do not see her in a sexual context. Her dress and lifestyle act as indicators of her morality. Islam inspires her to take a responsibility for her society. It is a real force pushing her towards charity work and an active social life. For her family these positive changes came as a surprise and made them accept her choice. The arguments they had raised were defeated. But it took time, she needed to prove it, to show every day that a committed Muslim is not a slave of obscurant and ignorant tradition. She, like many other "new Muslims" had to challenge deeply-rooted Soviet-era stereotypes that prevail in society.

The topic of secular attitudes and responses towards the new pious movements are not widely researched. They are not as attractive to analysts as new evidence on fundamentalist groups and their leaders. The quiet majority remains largely unheard. Among the few exceptions there is Pelkmans and McBrien's (2008) investigation into the strategies employed by the mainstream secular Muslims in Kyrgyzstan. They write about a widespread feeling that the new concepts of religiosity challenge traditional social norms and patterns of behaviors. The danger was coming at the same time from Muslim as well as Christian missionaries who, despite differences, were introducing alternative rules of orthodoxy, religiosity and community. Thus, new Muslim and Christian activists became objects of attack and propaganda of the state and of the secular segment of Kyrgyzstani society.

The division between the "religious" and the "a-religious" that is widespread across the postsocialist Muslim republics makes both sides critical of each other. The battle of arguments is fierce and intense. Practicing Muslims tend to be critical of those who call themselves Muslims (i.e., the majority), but are ignorant of Islamic religion, meaning the lack of "proper" knowledge, wrong conduct, rejection of dietary rules (mostly, drinking alcohol and eating pork). Besides, pious Muslims criticize the existing cultural system which, in their mind, lack the reference at the core of an ideal Islamic society (i.e., the one that developed in the first centuries of Islam). They see a rupture between an imagined perfect Islamic society and the way Muslim postsocialist societies operate. This problem was summarized by a young Sunni man:

> My friend has been in Western countries. He told me a thought-provoking thing: "In the West I have seen Islam, but not Muslims; in Eastern Muslim countries I see Muslims, but not Islam."

For this man, Islam visible in the West means a functioning democracy, no (or little) corruption, a respect for law, scientific progress. In a truly, i.e., not nominally, Islamic society, there is a certain socio-political order governed by the rules and values that were commanded by God. An Islamic path, in the eyes of the young Salafi and many of his colleagues, equals not only to a strict fulfilment of religious rituals, but also to a social change in morality and political culture. Thus, for practicing Muslims the struggle means not only competition with other religious systems of meanings; the struggle also concerns secular and religious norms and values. Islam gives a language to express the dissatisfaction with reality. It provides a utopian vision of a society and state to confront the status quo. It gives hope that a better social order is possible.

"Market" Choices

One of the most striking observations for me in Baku was a Muslim discourse of religion as a free market. A market on which people are expected to make a sensible choice, based on their preferences and knowledge. It is not the only discourse concerning pluralism, but it is a popular one. The availability of choices makes it possible for larger groups of people to find "their" religious tradition and, thus, increases the number of people engaged in religion. Transnational religious activists engaged in the struggle for the faithful. Religious campaigns became especially intensive in the early 1990s, when both the "hunger" for spirituality was at an extremely high level, and religious policies of the independent states in the Caucasus and Central Asia were more liberal than at present. Various missionaries passionately promoted their version of religion with all accessible measures and resources. They engaged in polemics with their rivals and worked towards developing a positive image of a religious identity in their tradition.

The patterns of choices are complex. There are several ways towards particular Islamic traditions. I encountered several people from secular Shiite families who have become Sunni. Some other people coming from ethnic Muslim environment (with little or no awareness of Islamic sects) decided to embrace either the Sunni or Shia form of Islam. There are also cases of Sunni Muslims who started to follow Shiism at some point in their lives. Some of the believers I talked to were raised in mixed families, e. g., grandparents were Sunni and parents Shia, or there was a Jew or a Christian who married a follower of Islam, or some family members were married to a person following another tradition. The only two people who have underlined their Sufi identity had a member of a Sufi *ṭarīqa* in their families. There is an occurrence of religious people who describe themselves as "semi-Sunni, semi-Shia." Moreover, there are people who deliberately avoid using any sectarian label, preferring to be called "just Muslims." However, since their outlook and practices do not resemble the Shia model in any aspect, I classify them as Sunnites. When I was asking people which variant of religion they would like their children to follow, the most common answer was that it is up to children when they grow up. Thus, there is a certain level of open possibilities for people regarding their religious preferences. At least in theory. Even if we reject the rational choice model as not relevant to psychological and social mechanisms of a human being, we can distinguish some historical and geographical contexts, in which a religious change occurs more visibly. Even if we acknowledge the multitude of factors, external and internal, as having an impact on people's choices, we can see a post-Soviet area as a scene of frequent and widespread religious choices.

The choices people make concern various elements of religion, usually a tradition, which provides them with some interpretations of a complex Islamic system, a *maḏhab*, sources of authority, religious symbols, such as Islamic clothes. When I was inquiring about people's way to a specific tradition, they either replied that they followed the family's tradition or that they have changed it, but in both cases, they underlined that it was their own choice. The theme of an individual, free, rational choice was recalled by the respondents like a mantra: "Following Sunnism or Shiism is a matter of personal choice," "People should make up their minds on the basis of knowledge," "The choice of a Jafari school was my individual, rational choice," I have heard repeatedly. It was often suggested that personal preferences play a crucial role, e. g., "There is no compulsion in religion; a person follows this form that suits him most," "A choice is a matter of psychology." At Islamic University I have also heard more theological justification of a freedom of choice in regard to religion. An Islamic scholar reminded me that there is a hadith about individualism. It says that every person is different, and for that reason there is no strict path to follow. For some people, the final choice was preceded by a study of Islamic religion in general. Others did comparative research analysing pros and cons of each available option. And yet another group of my respondents began to practice Islam at the moment when they encountered people (peers, teachers, etc.) whose religiosity appealed to them. The pious example of a respectful person is a very strong motivating factor. In other cases, people learned about other Islamic options already after having decided to become an active Muslim.

The motivation to inquire about religion before making a choice was sometimes inspired by a family. Ethnic Muslims with a very limited knowledge of religion are usually suspicious of the pious public expression of religiosity. Stereotypes prevail. When their child starts doing *namaz* they often become frightened and urge children to study religion thoroughly, so that they can be sure about such a serious choice. Children must prove they understand the duties and obligations that are tied to religious life. They must be able to justify their choice, to give arguments in favour of Islamic religion.

There is a lot of confusion concerning the choice of a school of law. A variety of statements are being made, some of which contradict each other. There is a group of people who regard difference in *maḏhabs* as more crucial than between Sunnism, Shiism and Sufism. Their decision to follow a given school of law was preceded by serious reflection and research. Other Muslims follow a particular *maḏhab*, but treat their choice as their own individual preference. There was a young Muslim who changed his father's Shafii school for Hanafi, because he regards the latter as less demanding and thus better suiting his current university life. That was his conscious choice. He, like many others, believes that the level

of religiosity shall increase with age. Older people, as more respectful, are expected to be more religious. A great number of people either make use of all legal schools, regarding them as equal, or do not follow any of them. When there is no clear guidance or tradition of following a particular *maḏhab*, the choice is too difficult for those "new Muslims" without a theological background. They read about all of schools in books and in the Internet but find it hard to compare them: "When I read about the differences between the schools of law I went crazy. Each school has its own arguments and I can't say that this one is better than others," one student said. Without a guide, a teacher, a leader the theoretical knowledge is too wide to grasp.

Why is choosing a religious model so widespread? Most people mentioned the long tradition of tolerance, or, as others put it, "the lack of awareness about religious divides." Anyway, during communism almost nobody paid attention to differences, as they were reduced to minor ritualistic elements and practiced mainly in a private sphere. Another frequent argument signalled by my informants refers to a characteristic of Islamic doctrine expressed in the citation at the beginning of the book. There is a conviction that diversity is an integral part of Islam.

Religious leaders usually propose some criteria for selecting a "good" tradition. Haji Ilgar has a well-thought list of them. He pointed to the following: (1) rationality ("chosen religious way shall be close to reason"), (2) assessing the attitude a particular religious tradition developed towards a human being, (3) a possibility of self-realization. Only when a religious ideology upholds these standards can it be a subject of choice. A decision must be based upon studies and reflection. No authority has a right to dictate the choice. It must be individual. People need to know what rules they follow and why. A director of an NGO, engaged in popularizing Islamic knowledge, told me that the most important in making a choice and finding a way in the chaos of information is one rule—"the golden mean." No extreme ideologies are acceptable. No radicalism. She also stresses the need to learn about other religions and treats all (Sunni) schools of law as offering some useful guidelines.

Sunnism Versus Shiism

What stands behind a religious choice? Why are some people in favour of the Sunni model and some prefer Shiism? How do people justify their decisions of choosing a particular religious path?

There is a recent, distinct and possibly revolutionary cultural trend in contemporary Azerbaijan of a massive turn of the traditionally Shiite Muslim society

towards Sunnism. It does not, however, mean that Shiism is unattractive and rejected. Numerous people and groups feel themselves well in the Shiite tradition. Reasons that Shia people give to explain their decision are, to a certain extent, similar to what Sunnis say. Both groups underline their own search for the truth or for a religious model that would most suit them. The choice was not accidental, they argue.

During a discussion with female members of the Juma community, one women told her story of moving from Sunni to Shia Islam:

> Why was I a Sunni Muslim? My family was ethnically Sunni, and since childhood I had only information about this Islamic branch. That was the Islam I was shown. But when I was 18, I got interested in religion, so I began to look for information and learn about different schools. People were coming from various Muslim countries to us, they brought us books, and were telling us about Islam. Finally, I have decided to follow the [Shia] Jafari *maḍhab*, but it is solely my personal, rational choice.

A frequent explanation for choosing Shiite Islam was its "reasonability." A Muslim Shiite scholar in his thirties confirms the need to be familiar with religion before making up one's mind. He recalled a period after Azerbaijan regained independence when there was a lot of criticism of Shiism. Those public attacks inspired him to begin his own inquiry: "I was reading about Sunni and Shia Islam. I found that much of the allegations against Shiism was based on false information and exaggeration." The comparative analysis led him to the conclusion that for him Shiism made more sense. This tradition requires more knowledge and is not superficial. In its core is the constant reflection and study. More depends on one's own interpretations of the Koran. In Sunnism, the process of issuing fatwas is more flexible than in Shiism—more people claim that they can announce their own "official" statement. In Shia Islam one must devote a lot of time to studies to reach the level to be granted permission to issue fatwas. Such a scholar is thus more trustworthy.

Another young Shiite graduated from the Islamic University in Baku, which is accepting both Shia and Sunni Muslims. For him the preference for Shiism had two sources: a family background and religious studies. In 2000 – 2003, he did research on both Islamic branches mainly from Sunni sources. At the university he also attended courses on Sunni fikh. Researching Sunni writings and comparing them with Shia, he became convinced that in fact Shia arguments are more convincing and logical for him. Moreover, historical events do not support Sunni view. "Shia lay strong emphasis on intellect and logical reasoning. When there are no clear answers in the Koran and Sunna, Shiites are encouraged to use their own mind," he elaborated on his choice. It would be interesting to know

how were these arguments influenced by his family or university teachers. In the prevalent "rationalistic" discourse on religion, few would admit to that.

Pro-Shia arguments, but of different kind, were given by less educated people. They opposed the moderate character of Shiite people against more radical Sunnis. In their stories, the image of Sunnism pertains chiefly to North Caucasus regions. Sunni Chechens are admired for their knowledge of Islam, but at the same time they are viewed as too dangerous and too fanatical. That's how mass media present them. Similar prejudice relates to the "local Sunnis," most commonly known as "Wahhabis." Radicalism allegedly relates only to Sunnism. This is enough to discourage some people even from thinking about joining the Sunni community.

On the other hand, the majority of Azerbaijani Sunnis describe themselves as "moderate," and distance themselves from extremist groups that allegedly have links with global terrorist networks. They either regard both Islamic traditions as equal and ascribe their choice to individual preferences, or they use arguments of the Sunni discourse according to which Shiism is a mistake, misinterpretation of history. In the second case, only Salafi Islam is a "real" or "true" form of religion. That argument appears and is thoroughly discussed in numerous Salafi books, easily available in Baku. As far as the former argument is concerned, I will mention just one example, which shows that the choices can be really individual. A Sunni lecturer at the Department of Religious Studies of the Baku State University was telling me about his search for the truth. At the beginning, he was interested in both Islamic variants, but under the influence of books and reflection he accepted the Sunni path and follows it as much as possible. However, he is not using his knowledge of religion to persuade anybody into the same direction. His parents and wife are Shia Muslims, and everybody in the family accepts each other's choices. "I just like Sunnism more," he concluded.

Another interesting argument in favour of Sunnism refers to Christianity and its internal divisions. During a discussion I held with a group of Sunni Muslim men, one of them proposed thinking about Sunnism as Protestantism, in contrast to Catholicism-like Shiism. According to this view, Shia people surround themselves with a variety of saints and other mediators between people and God. Instead of listening directly to the words of God, written in the Koran, Shiites listen to their mullas and ayatollahs. They refer to saints and magic. They do not follow their logic and rationality in contemplating religious sources. Their religiosity is embedded in customs, traditions, rituals. History is given a priority over the Revelation and the life of the Prophet. The traditions that evolved in the course of centuries have nothing in common with original Islam as it has been passed to Mahomet. What truly matters, is the Koran and the Sunna, the direct message from God, the Sunnis argued.

A sociologically interesting category is constituted of people who have decided to practice religion, but are caught between two traditions. One of them was a professor of the Baku Caucasus University. Answering my question about his religious preferences, he called himself "semi-Sunni, semi-Shia." How is it possible? Two opposing, often clashing Islams at the same time? His family cultivates Sunni tradition, he made it clear at the beginning. Nevertheless, when he became interested in religious issues, like many other people, he set out to study stories and arguments of both groups. Finally, he concluded that Shiites are right taking into consideration historical and legal points of view. Later, however, Shiites changed a lot in Islamic religion, especially they added too many elements which distorted religion, such as religious rituals, the faith in Imams. On the other hand, those elements, he argued, are not only wrong, but also totally irrelevant for contemporary Muslims. That's why he made up his mind to be in the middle. He's fortunate not to live in a country torn by violent clashes, where religion overlaps with ethnicity or clan allegiances.

Another person who deliberately did not choose one tradition was a 23-year-old girl. She said, "In a way I am Shia, because I pray the way Shiites pray—with loose hands along the body. I learned it from books and find it better for me; this posture resembles a slave standing before his Master." But, on the other hand, the sources of knowledge about Islam that she uses (books and Internet sites) are Sunni, in my opinion—Sunni Salafi, as her arguments in disputes resemble Salafi discourse. Shiite way of performing rituals, Sunni ideology.

Another attitude is exemplified by the rector of the Islamic University in Baku, with whom I had a short interview. "As a rector, I am a Muslim," he declared at the very beginning. He was born in Nakhchivan, one of the main strongholds of pious Shiism, and he is still attached to that place. Then he studied in Tashkent, where he began to pray in a Sunni way, as the majority of Muslims did at that time. That was the way he was taught. In his current work he does not place emphasis on the differences between Sunnism and Shiism. His university accepts students of both traditions. The differences should be minimalized as Islam is only one. According to him, the graduates are first of all "Muslims." That is the main message he carries to students.

6.5 Plausibility and Legitimacy

Recent changes in religion in the South Caucasian Muslim republic introduced a great level of pluralism. It is a huge novelty in a society accustomed to clinging to their religious worldview and practices. Religious elements, although not many during the long communist era, were taken for granted. Not much thought

was given to choosing or changing one's religious tradition. The emergence of modern pluralism, alongside loud and effective religious movements, radically changed this situation. Nowadays people are faced with the necessity of making their own choice, for which they are responsible, and which they have to justify. In Azerbaijan such a situation results, among other things, in the existence of many religiously-mixed families in which children are given the freedom to choose their own way. Although people's religious choices are inspired by a wide range of factors, such as social or economic, my focus was on the personal choice and its justification, just as believers present them.

There are two vital issues concerning the impact of pluralism. The first is the problem of pluralism and plausibility: How can people regard their religious convictions as real in the light of competing alternative religious and non-religious ideological systems? The second issue is a question of practices used in an adaptation to new conditions. Peter Berger claimed (1967) (in regard to religious institutions) that there are two kinds of practices or attitudes, one consisting in adaptation to a pluralistic situation, the second—in rejecting it. Similarly, believers either espouse an inclusivist or exclusivist model of religious diversity. Both types of strategies lead to an increased engagement in religious issues. In the inclusivist model, social actors are continuously faced with religious alternatives. They interact with others who have diverse, often contradicting opinions. They are open to confront and reflect upon their ideas. In an exchange of views and discussions they get to know other options and points of view. To defend their views, they must become more knowledgeable in various aspects of their religious tradition. They need arguments to respond to questions and allegations. In the exclusivist model, people react to pluralism with anxiety. They limit their contacts with those belonging to other religious traditions. In this process of "self-ghettoization" they create their justifications of being more right and proper than others. They look for ways to justify their claims that they represent the real Muslims. To defend themselves against accusations, they constantly have to show and prove their piety to themselves and to the outer world. Being in the limelight, they cannot omit a Friday mosque prayer or dress "improperly." During the Ramadan they must fast with all the rigor Islam requires. In that way, their religious engagement increases as well.

Why Islam is the only true religion?: Overcoming the Problem of Plausibility

> Pluralism threatens the plausibility of religious belief systems by exposing their human origin and thereby weakens competing faiths (Bruce 1992: 170, in: Stark (1998)).

The problem of plausibility of religion emerges when people are confronted with competing ideas. The above quotation presents a version of one of the most influential theses that was supposed to explain the way in which pluralism leads to the erosion of religion's role in society. Contemporary empirical evidence from most parts of the world that undergo a resurgence of religious life suggests however something opposite. In Azerbaijan, which was all of sudden exposed to the "threat" of diversity, there was a lot of confusion in the first years after 1991. At present, after two decades, there is a surprisingly high level of certainty among believers. How is it possible? As it was mentioned before, nationalism and science, which are often viewed as secular ideological alternatives to religion, are well integrated into religious convictions. Those two strong forces entered the wide religious landscape of ideas. Ideologies were adapted to the present needs. For believers, nationalism and science even reinforce religious faith, support it with novel arguments, present it in more attractive way.

One of the main processes that accounts for the certainty in the pluralistic context is legitimation in Berger's (1967, p. 61) interpretation. It is understood as a way in which "knowledge" that is socially objectified is employed to justify an existing social order. In the case of Azerbaijan this problem translates itself into a question: How do people assert that religion, or a religious branch they follow, contains the truth? This issue can be divided into two more precise questions. One would touch the competition between Islam and other religions that are around. The second is related to an understanding of ways in which believers gain certainty that their tradition is right or better than others.

The Islamic discourse in Baku about other religions is reduced to monotheistic religions. Maybe it was due to my presence as a Christian in a Muslims society that have induced my interlocutors to raise the topic of Christianity versus Islam. Or maybe it stems from the long polemical tradition in Islam related to monotheistic faiths. In Azerbaijan, it could have been reinforced by the presence of Russian and other Christian communities. One of my observations, surprising at the first sight, was that the inter-religious discourse is more developed, or more common, than the intra-religious one. There are more arguments concerning Islam and Christianity or Islam and Judaism than Shiism and Sunnism or Sufism. In a society, where more than 95 percent of people share one religion, and the religious divisions are found mostly inside Islam offering various interpretations, one may expect the opposite to be true. Why is it so? Apart from the

polemical Islamic tradition already mentioned, there are some socio-political issues at stake. Azerbaijan has Christian neighbours—Georgia, Armenia, and Russia. International relations in the Caucasus have never been smooth and easy. During conflicts, religion is often used in creating the image of an enemy. Moreover, Azerbaijan is almost monolithic in terms of its Islamic identity. Interactions between people of different faiths are scarce and relationships weak. There are hardly any opportunities to verify existing stereotypes and change the dominant discourse. When people socialize, as it is the case of Muslims in Azerbaijan following different variants of Islam, it is much more difficult to maintain stereotypical images. Shiite and Sunni Muslims meet in family circles, at schools, at universities, in bars.

There are at least five main types of arguments, partially overlapping, used by Muslims to create a representation of Islam as the true religion. The most common is the claim that Judaism and Christianity, two main competitors to Islam, have been modified by people. There is a non-divine factor in their teachings. Even though Muslim believers accept those two religions as created by God as well, they argue that, in the course of time, some changes were introduced to Jewish and Christian sources that have a distinct sign of human interference. Muslims in Baku claim: "I studied Christian and Jewish Scriptures and I saw the hands of people in both of them," "Only the Koran contains true words of God." A 50-year old Muslim woman who had studied Christianity said that even the Bible includes information that Muhammad would be the last Prophet. However, this information appeared only in the old version of the Christian Bible which was lost for a long time and has only recently been found. But apparently it is inaccessible to the public. Another version of this explanation states that the Torah had been hidden for a long time, and, in the meantime, people tried to recreate it by inventing some rules and stories allegedly included in the original Scripture. Fortunately, the true Torah has recently been excavated, and now we have the proof that people were deceived. But a believer must trust in what others, more knowledgeable, say.

Another popular idea circulating alongside the Caspian seaside links the alternations in Christianity and Judaism to Jews. Again, science becomes useful to provide justifications. Changes introduced to Christianity have been scientifically proven, my Muslim friend asserts. There is a story of a British scholar who was close to the Christian church and had access to the religious sources collected at the Cambridge University. He devoted some time to studying Christian documents, largely unknown to the public. His analytic mind led him to confront his faith with the original historical documents without prejudice. He made a breakthrough discovery that a lot of elements in the core of religious doctrine were added later than it is usually assumed. The only holy book that contains

pure words of God is the Koran. I was unable to get more precise information about the name of the scholar or the written proof for these words. Spoken stories do not need confirmation.

There is some evidence for that thesis, as a lot of Muslims believe. The most convincing for them is the belief that there is no contradiction in the Islamic Scripture ("If people wrote the Koran, there would be some inconsistency in it. Since there are no two ayats contradicting each other, it is the proof for the perfection of Islam," my respondents argued). For that reason, in the Koran one can find answers for all questions and problems. It is a perfect unity encompassing all spheres of life.

Another argument places an emphasis on the gradual development of monotheistic religion, which resulted in the appearance of Islam. Judaism and Christianity are viewed as intermediary phases of the religious development. "Islam is not the perfect religion just because we think so. People themselves cannot judge such issues. It is because Allah said that Islam is the last and full Revelation. The Koran contains everything that the Creator wanted us to know," a haji explained. According to this idea, earlier religions were supposed to prepare the faithful to embrace the final words of God that came with the Koran. One of my interlocutors compared this process to school education; to enter the university one has to pass several classes in lower institutions and gradually get prepared. Similarly, people had to experience Judaism and then Christianity to be able to understand and adopt Islam.

The conviction that Islam is true is also based on the belief that "the logic of the Koran should be obvious for every person, especially the educated ones," as I was told. Once non-Muslims get unbiased information about Islam, they will undoubtedly accept it. To make this statement more reliable, Muslims give examples of famous Christians from Western countries who converted to Islam. Converts do not only find the real truth, but, additionally, as a kind of reward, have half of their sins automatically forgiven. Some Muslims believe that Michael Jackson, who committed a grave sin of plastic surgery, had, after his conversion, a chance to go to Heaven. I have also been told many times of the massive turn to Islam in Russia. Allegedly every day Christians visit mosques to change their faith. One discussion I held with a group of Muslims on this topic ended with a suggestion that the reason I have not accepted Islam so far is that I did not read the Koran carefully enough.

Another argument used in the polemics with Christians is as follows: Islam is considered to be superior to other religions because of its humanitarianism. One friend of mine explored the topic:

> Islam takes into account everything that can happen to a human being. Life events are very complex sometimes, and Islam knows the psychology of people and takes it into consideration. There are strict rules in our religion, but in extreme situations they become flexible. For example, pork is forbidden for us, but when a person is facing starvation and he has only a pig, he can eat it without committing a sin. Similarly, if a woman cannot have a child, her husband, instead of divorcing her, can marry a second woman for the sake of the family.

This argument that Islam takes care of human weaknesses and is applicable to all life situations was mentioned quite often in regard to the Islamic law. When I pointed to some aspects raising controversies in Europe I was usually given an answer that some regulations have only one purpose—to guide people in extreme or unusual situations. These are not everyday solutions.

Finally, Muslims have to deal with the question of the lower level of socio-economic development of Islamic societies. In order to account for this situation, many religious Muslims point to the ignorance of Islamic religion among believers. The myth of the Golden Age of Islam in its first centuries, when Muslims societies were thriving, is evoked. The Muslim world should undertake reforms to be able to excel once again in science and cultural achievements. The reasons for contemporary difficulties lie not in Islam but in the lack of faith and knowledge among believers. The revival of Islam will open another Golden Era for Muslims and humanity.

These claims are used by Azerbaijani Muslims to legitimize the superiority of Islam over other faiths. People use some variants of those arguments to get rid of possible doubts that arise in the encounter with other religions. However, as I have already remarked, the intra-religious discourse, concerning especially the differences between Shiism and Sunnis, is less frequently called forth.

Exclusivist and Inclusivist Approaches

The common practice among Azerbaijani Muslims of justifying their religious decision by a reference to the freedom of choice can be understood as representing the model of religious inclusiveness opposed to exclusiveness. These are the two basic forms of response to the challenge of diversity and uncertainty in a social environment. Inclusivist strategies involve at least a certain degree of social interaction between people representing different religious groups. They take two forms. One is based on a conviction that all religions and religious forms are acceptable but Islam has some advantages; the second does not assume any kind of superiority. The first strategy can be illustrated by the following quotation from a young Muslim's narrative about Islam:

> In reality, religion is only one. Jewish, Christian and Muslim religions is the same. God is the same, rules are the same. What makes Islam different from Christianity is only the form. It is not the most crucial thing, but here lies the difference. It is like with a computer and a software. If somebody uses Windows and regards it as a good system, then he will be attached to it. But, when an updated version appears, some people will eagerly install it. In religion, a new version means an easier way towards God. It does not mean that previous "editions" were wrong. Updates give us new opportunities. What's more, the choice of a new version seems to be obvious—it is a question of common sense and rational judgment of a situation.

All monotheistic religions are perceived to be true, the only difference is that Islam offers something more to believers. There is, thus, a kind of superiority of Islamic religion. Those who follow other religions are tolerated, but frowned upon a little as lacking the proper level of rationality. But there is a space for socializing and discussions.

The other inclusivist model was usually expressed in the form of arguments such as those of my informants: "God is one, but there are many paths to Him," "Catholics, Baptists, Muslims, Jews pray to the same God but in different languages." In this approach it is believed that all truly religious people, regardless of their specific religion, have a chance to reach heaven. When people talk about Sunnism and Shiism they frequently point to the long tradition of co-existence and tolerance of both groups and underline the common features, e. g., a Shia girl told me that the most important for her is being a Muslim. Concerning the division in Islam she compared it to two "models or schools" that have the same source—the Koran. As with many other Muslims I talked to about this issue, she noted that the most important is what unites all Muslims, i. e., the belief in God. An implication of such an inclusivist attitude is the lack of the need of a missionary strategy.

How do the inclusivist strategies influence the religious situation? Many Muslims admit to being interested in the opinions of Muslims holding different convictions. They engage in dialogs and debates which enable them to increase their knowledge about religion. The problem is mainly with one group—Salafi. Some Shiite communities used to invite them, as the main opponents, to public debates, but Salafis refused. They were not ready for confrontations on Shiites' conditions. From time to time some organizations manage to gather both Sunni and Shia Muslims, who act, pray, and discuss religious issues with each other. Some members of the Azerbaijani intelligentsia attend congresses and seminars where they discuss problematic issues. But there are also meetings in a more private space, especially at homes or tea houses. Once I was invited to have a discussion with a group of Muslim men who hold active debates in the religious section of an Azeri Internet forum. All of those who came were Sun-

nis, including one "moderate Salafi" (as others called him), and one follower of Sufism. Even though they disagreed on some issues, such as the missionary activities in Azerbaijan or an attitude to non-Muslim religions, they had a chance to get to know each other's point of view and to refine their arguments used in the competition. When I was asking people a question about the effects of such discussions, they used to say that they enabled the search for common points in various approaches to Islam. Such debates or just simple conversations demand from people that they learn more about religion to be able to justify their opinions. Some believers changed their opinions in religious matters under the influence of more convincing arguments. Others have managed to convince their interlocutors to their version.

In case when a Muslim group isolates itself from the rest of the society, the increase in religiosity takes place differently. In Azerbaijan, an exclusivist approach and strategies are characteristic of the Salafi community. Although a few Salafis agreed to meet with me, the general impression in the society is that this group rejects any confrontations. Their basic assumption is that only their tradition possesses the final truth from God. A professor told me that in the past he used to meet with Salafis and endeavoured to hold debates. But soon he realized that there was no point in it, since they reject all other understandings of Islam and "blindly believe in their truth and ideas." At the beginning of their activity in the country Salafis were much more ready to meet. As political and public pressure around them grew, they soon changed their strategy. Instead of engaging in pointless, from their point of view, discussions, they create an image of the most pious Muslims who are closer to God than other Muslims by following the behavior of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. They have chosen a strict faith accompanied by pious behavior, which they express by doing *namaz* (allegedly 5 times a day) and wearing "proper Islamic clothes." In the face of competition from other religious groups, Salafis have to prove their uniqueness by showing an above average level of religiosity.

There are also people who accept both approaches, inclusivist and exclusivist, at the same time. In a conversation about prospects of salvation for non-Muslims an *akhund* of a Shia mosque made a distinction on the basis of options available to a person. He said:

> If an old woman lives in a remote part of Siberia, or in a Polish village, and has no chance of getting information about the true Islamic religion, she will not go to hell. But when a person is educated, as you are, knows what Islam is, and consciously rejects it, there will be no hope for her or him.

Chapter 7
Religious Competition

There is an intense competition for the minds and souls of Muslims going on in the vast areas of the post-socialist lands. This struggle is unequal. Groups and movements have various resources, various amounts and forms of capitals. Some have the support of a political power, some operate illegally. Some belong to international networks, some are independent products of the local situation. Some produce religious teachings that more persuasive to the masses, apply to their sensibilities, respond to the mentalities and world views. Some are attractive only to few intellectuals. Let us take a closer look at the mechanism of this struggle in contemporary Azerbaijan, where the multiple pious movements present an attractive alternative to secular worldviews and where the historical dominance of Shiism and its culture is now being challenged by the Sunni interpretation of Islam.

7.1 Official and Unofficial Islam

Until the end of the Soviet rule contacts with the supernatural sphere in Muslim Central Asia and the Caucasus were shared between two groups of local religious specialists representing the so-called "official" (mainly Shiite) and "unofficial" (both Shia and Sunni) Islam characterized earlier. For a long time, they were the only competitors for spiritual influence among believers. In the post-Soviet era the struggle between them is less intense, as new circumstances emerged. The Shiite establishment directed its attention against new and more serious opponents. Moreover, the descendants of saints do not play an active part in this competition.

The arrival of foreign Islamic proselytizers radically changed the situation of the official hierarchy. Although the clergy managed to maintain their position even after the independence of Azerbaijan, they were forced to adapt their strategies to respond to the popularity of pious, less official religious groups and movements from such countries as Saudi Arabia, Iran, or Turkey. Before focusing on the methods employed in this competition, a short background on the organizational aspect of Islam is necessary. The formal administration structures consist of the Caucasus Muslim Board, which has survived the political transformation and, since 1980, is continuously headed by the same person—Islamic scholar and cleric, *sheikh-ul-islam* Allahshukur Pashazade. The Board controls

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a significant part of religious institutions, especially the majority of active mosques and educational institutions.

Haji Surhay Mamedov, an officially appointed *akhund* of the Juma mosque in Icheri Sheher, eagerly explained to me an institutional aspect of religion in this country. There are three crucial positions in Islam in Azerbaijan nowadays: a mulla, an *akhund*, and the *sheikh-ul-islam*. A mulla is traditionally occupied with leading life rituals, such as a birth of a child, marriage ceremonies, or funerals. But titles are context-dependent: their meanings change, he added. Outside Azerbaijan, a mulla means also a teacher or a scholar. In this country, the term *akhund* is a title of a person who graduated from an Islamic academy or university and specializes in Islamic theology and law. Such a scholar is then a candidate for the head of one of mosques operating under the jurisdiction of the Muslim Board. *Sheikh-ul-islam* is the highest title in the hierarchy of the Azerbaijani clergy. This term denotes a religious leader but in the Azerbaijani context—a person who represents all Muslims of the Caucasus. According to haji Mamedov, the title "sheikh-ul-islam" also means the highest religious authority. When an *akhund* cannot find an answer to a religious question, he addresses the sheikh, who issues fatwas and explains all ambiguities. He has a lot of autonomy and even the president cannot dismiss him. The only possibility to change a person in charge of the Board is the general consent of all *akhunds* in the country, which is hardly an imaginable option. The title "sheikh-ul-islam" in an equivalent to "ayatollah," with the difference that in Azerbaijan there is only one sheikh and in Iran there are numerous ayatollahs. The *akhund* explained this by pointing to the religious nature of an Iranian state and an increased demand for religious scholars. If Azeris were as religious as Iranians then many more religious teachers would be needed. It is worth noting that Mamedov's account of the situation in the Caucasus omits the Sunni religious institutions, as well as the religious figures acting outside of the official network. He did not mention dervishes, who actively participate in some wedding rituals and continue the long tradition of the Azerbaijani classical music known as *mugham* (Naroditskaya, 2004). As if the only reality that exists was the official reality organized and managed by the *sheikh-ul-islam* and his clerics.

Shiite *akhunds* are the only people who hold the *sheikh-ul-islam* as the highest religious authority in the country. All other people I met, both Shia and Sunni, were more or less critical of him, as well as of people holding other positions (of a mulla or an *akhund*). Religious people regard local mullas as uneducated, regressive, and ignorant people. The mullas in Azerbaijan too often lack even the basic skills required to lead a religious community or do their tasks such as conducting a funeral ceremony in a proper way. The following story from my interview with a journalist illustrates this point very well:

Figure 7.1 Taza Pir mosque in Baku

> Maybe you have noticed a nearby large cemetery. Inside you can find our mullas, "specialists" in Islamic rituals. Once I was there with my father, who pointed to one mulla walking among graves and said: "10 years ago he was a drunkard." Then my father noticed another mulla and remarked: "And that one was in prison." Those allegedly religious people have no education. They have no idea of Arabic language nor of the Koran. They only manage to learn a few prayers by heart and recite them during ceremonies.

A Persian proverb likewise expresses the sentiments surrounding mullas nowadays (Fisher, Michael, 2003, p. 136):

> How easy to become a mullah [learned],
> How hard to become Adam [a man].

Faxri Xiyəbani Cemetery—Cemetery of the Honoured Ones—resembles a quiet, peaceful park offering a welcome rest from the noisy and fast life of a metropolis. Here many prominent Azeri public figures, artists, scholars, sportsmen and politicians are buried. The shapes of the monuments commemorating the deceased are among the most extraordinary I have ever seen. The monuments and drawings are realistic and depict the appearance and job of the person in the grave in

detail. The most famous is the gravestone of the late president Heydar Alieyev, constantly attracting official visits. And indeed, there are few mullahs in religious attire strolling around the cemetery. One can ask them to say a prayer for a dead relative or friend.

The official religious structures are widely considered to be the remnants of the Soviet structure. The common accusation that believers raise is the communist past of people in charge of Islamic institutions and their links with secret services. Allahshukur Pashazade, a Talysh born in Lenkoran in 1949, is considered to be a pragmatist and opportunist who has always been too close to the political power that is willing to support his religious presidency. His loyalist attitude began already in the Soviet era. The Caucasus Muslim Board is widely regarded as an organization controlled in the past by the KGB, and nowadays the clerical establishment is accused of having collaborated with the Soviets. People generally do not trust them and therefore do not ask them for help or advice. During my visit to the Juma mosque, the *akhund* answered several phone calls, but the questions were pragmatic and simple. They asked about the time of prayer on that particular day, as the timing changes every day, and nothing more serious. During my research I encountered only two women that expressed a more nuanced attitude to the sheikh. They admitted that he is a "real Shia and a wise person; he knows how to talk in a diplomatic fashion and knows how to take care of his personal interest—it is incredible that he managed to maintain his position despite of the change of the regime and of subsequent presidents."

The right to control over mosques, an appointment of *akhund*s and monitoring of sermons and religious teaching are the main resources of the official clergy. State's mosques, under the jurisdiction of Pashazade are known to receive ready sermons and guidelines. Not a single voice of criticism of the government is acceptable. For those eager to make a career in the religious industry it is necessary to subordinate to official and unofficial rules and norms of the Muslim Board. It is not enough to graduate from a particular university, and precisely from the Baku Islamic University headed by Haji Sabir. Prospective *akhund*s must also go through an attestation process. If they are allowed to take special exams and pass them successfully they will be assigned to a mosque. As the local Islamic higher education is relatively new (it was established in the early 1990s), old religious cadres hold diplomas from Uzbekistan's universities. For instance, an *akhund* of the Shia Suleymanov mosque told me that the sheikh Pashazade studied Islam in Uzbekistan, at first in a madrasa in Bukhara (Mir-i Arab Academy) and later at the Islamic University of Tashkent. The practice of restrictions to leaderships in mosques is one of the chief practices used by the Islamic hierarchy to maintain their status and material capital. According to the recent

legal rules, people holding foreign diplomas, even from prestigious Islamic universities, are unable to get a nomination to be in charge of a registered mosque.

Mosques have to gain their financial capital themselves (Motika, 2001). Most of the income comes from money paid by believers for individual religious ceremonies, such as weddings or funerals. As there is a general scarcity of material resources, practices leading to exclude other religious specialists, in this case imams and *akhunds* from abroad, need to be effective. The Muslim Board has also significant revenue from the control over profitable business of hajj organizations. The costs of a trip to Mecca are for an average Azeri citizen very high. To gain a total control over this kind of financial capital, *sheikh-ul-islam* eliminated his rivals announcing officially that only the Caucasus Muslim Board can organize the annual pilgrimage (Aliyev, 2009). To explain the high costs of the pilgrimage the Sheikh of Islam points to the requirements of Saudi Arabia and the protocols signed every year with the Hajj Ministry of Saudi Arabia (Allahshukur, 2013). For an impoverished society, where the majority hardly manages to get by, the hajj is out of reach. In some cases an affluent patron or sponsor decides to cover the expenses.

Another source of income comes from black donation boxes, *nazir qutusu*, located outside or inside mosques, where people can leave money. The most popular mosques gather money from the faithful who come to pray and thank God for listening to their wishes, also by donating a few manats to charity boxes. According to the version of the Muslim Board, the money is used for the current functioning of mosques, such as salaries or urgent renovations. Although people generally do not believe in this explanation, suspecting the sheikh and other members of the religious establishment to get advantage of this resource, they continue to leave their money at mosques (Bedford, 2009).

The control over material and political capital has not been sufficient to gain support and influence in society. Above all, the lack of religious and symbolic capital hindered the success to control religious life. Officially sanctioned Shia clergy are unable to provide adequate religious ideas and religious knowledge demanded by believers. Fighting for social support, Pashazade employed various strategies, but most of them proved unsuccessful in the light of fierce competition. One of them was undertaken in the early 1990s, when he endeavoured to establish positive relationships with those who threaten him the most—independent preachers and groups as well as some Islamist organizations. As a pragmatic actor, he was eager even to transform his religious ideas in line with Islamist programs. He even proposed to reintroduce the Arabic alphabet in Azerbaijan, which was already not in use for over 60 years. However, such moves only deteriorated the sheikh's authority (Goyushov, 2008). The favourable conditions for the Islamic religion in society did not mean that people were eager

Figure 7.2 A mosque in Baku's Icheri Sheher (Old City) and a *nazir qutusu* (donation box)

to transform their state into one of the Arab countries. Positive sentiments towards Turkey were much stronger.

Similarly, *sheikh-ul-islam*'s pragmatic search for international support to reinforce his power did not result in success. Soon after Azerbaijan regained independence, Pashazade made an alliance with a Chechen influential separatist Dzhokhar Dudayev. This enabled him to assume an active role in the creation of the Caucasus Confederation, which was supposed to help him extend his power over Muslims in the North Caucasus. However, neither the temporary support nor the change of the Board's name from the Spiritual Board of Transcaucasian Muslims[1] to the Caucasus Muslim Boards made his jurisdiction over Muslims from abroad a real force. After Putin has joined the international war on terrorism, Pashazade began to support his movements expecting help and support from Russia. In Azerbaijan, official clergy have identified local terrorists al-

1 The term "Transcaucasian" often refers only to three Caucasian republics, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

legedly in contact with Al-Qaida and labelled them Wahhabis.[2] The sheikh has also announced the *nurchular* movement to be an extremist group, which has to limit its activities (Goyushov, 2008).

But the Sheikh scored some points as well. An example of a successful move of the official establishment was an appropriation of an originally Zoroastrian celebration of New Year into a Shiite Islamic tradition. In Azerbaijan, the majority of people regard it as the main event in the whole year, and Pashazade, instead of condemning it as a pagan and un-Islamic ritual, every year congratulates Azerbaijanis on this occasion. In fact, accommodating non-Islamic practices is not new in Islam. Many prominent Islamic figures argued that *Novruz* belongs to their religion.

> *Novruz* is a symbol of renaissance of Nature and Earth created by Allah and it contains endless love to the Creator and thanks Him for blessing (...) *Novruz* coincides with a number of religious points, which increases significance of this holiday (...) Thanks to Allah that every *Novruz* Holiday promotes the successful, sustainable development of our country and people. It encourages us for our victory in Karabakh (News.Az, 2010).

This news report from the official speech of Sheikh-al-Islam delivered on the occasion of *Novruz* in 2010 make clear the adoption of this festival into the officially accepted Islamic symbols. This position is strongly criticized by his competitors who fight for a separation between tradition and religion. Some more religiously conscious people do not treat Novruz as a religious feast at all. They spend the day with family, visit friends and neighbours, but restrain from Novruz's allegedly Islamic character. Nevertheless, the popularity of *Novruz* among Azeri people gives a point to the official clergy. They let people celebrate what they enjoyed the most without forcing them to choose between fire worshipping and "real" Islam.

Another visible change introduced into Islamic culture under the recent influence of pluralism is the new reformist orientation of the Baku Islamic University. Although it is the only acceptable Islamic educational institution in Azerbaijan, it has made an effort to improve its image in society. Haji Saadi, the head of the Lenkoran branch of the university, expressed this strategy:

> We do not want Turkish or Iranian tradition to govern us. We prefer to have our own traditions. We have now entered the Internet generation, and Islam must adapt (International Crisis Group, 2008, p. 18).

2 Using the label "Wahhabism" in the sense of dangerous opponents has a long tradition; it dates back to the very beginning of al-Wahhab's movement in the eighteenth century.

In order to attract young people interested in Sunni ideas, the university embraces an ecumenical approach and emphasizes its Pan-Islamic identity. Theoretically it is open for any Muslim, regardless of his tradition or preferences. However, many of the graduates, as I was told by its former student, have strong Shia inclinations. Besides, most observers regard the level of education at this university as too low, especially in comparison to foreign well-established Islamic centres.

Another reform of the official leaders relates to ritualistic sphere of Shiism. Conventionally, traditional Shiite acts of self-mortification have been contested by Sunnis. They argue that this ritual is un-Islamic as it does not stem directly from the Koran. In the light of such accusations, the Shiite leaders undertook reforms to reinterpret the celebration of *Muḥarram* and *ʿĀšūrāʾ*. In fact, the same strategy of modernizing Islamic tradition has been employed by both the official, as well as unofficial Shiite communities. They propose actions such as blood donation instead of self-flagellation. While it has met with resistance on the part of many traditional Shiites in Azerbaijan who continue their old practices, the idea of replacing the bloody rituals with socially more useful acts is supported by many people. Hundreds of volunteers participate in this action to commemorate Imam Hussein. Blood donation campaigns are conducted in mosques all over Azerbaijan. The Caucasus Muslim Board announces a list of mosques as well as shrines that collect the blood, which, after medical tests, is then transferred to the Central Blood Bank. In 2010, according to the Board's spokesperson the following religious institutions joined the action during the Ashura Day: Taza Pir, Haji Sultanali, Bibi-Heybet, Mir-Movsum aga, Garachuhur, Sumgait Mosque, the Imamzade mosque in Ganja, in the Heydar mosque in Mingachevir, the Sheki mosque, the Shirvan Mosque, the Boyukbazar Mosque in Lankaran and the Barda mosque (Hajiyev, 2010). This trend is more global. Shiite communities in countries such as Turkey, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Iraq, United Arab Emirates and Iran organize blood donation actions and encourage the faithful to engage in such humanitarian activities.

The strategies of the descendants of saints, regarded in the USSR as representatives of "unofficial Islam" have a different nature. The people in charge of family shrines take advantage of the symbolic capital of people buried in those places, i.e., of their genealogy and titles. The sacred descent is believed to guarantee an extraordinary spiritual power and an ability to give blessings to believers. Although the practice of *ziyārat* to the tombs has become an object of fierce attack of many Sunni groups, the popular *pirs* still attract a huge numbers of pilgrims and do not engage in open conflict with other Islamic traditions. There is a niche that they cover. On the basis of interviews and conversations with people in Baku I have identified the following most popular *pirs:*

1. Mir Movsum Aga's tomb in Shuvalan, a suburb of Baku, and the saint's house in the center of Baku
2. Ali Ayaghi (Ali's Foot) in Buzovna on the Absheron Peninsula
3. The tomb of Rahima khanum, located in Nardaran
4. The tomb of Bibi Heybet, on the outskirts of Baku[3]
5. The Imamzadeh in Ganja
6. Ashab-e Kehf in Nakhchivan, which draws on a legend from the Koran

These places of worship are valued by people for the simple and undemanding requirements, contrasted with the complex rules of orthodox Islam. Believers do not face any problems with any formal affiliation. The rules and rituals are very simple. No knowledge of Arabic is necessary. People praying at the tombs ask for help and leave money, food, cloth, or even precious stones in exchange. The *nazirs*, "gifts" for a *sayyid*, become an important source of a capital for people possessing or controlling the places. The substantial level of economic self-sufficiency enabled the most popular *pirs* to stay independent of Pashazade's control. The deep-rooted and emotional attachment of Azerbaijani people to their saints and miracles seems to have survived attacks from other sides, but also encouraged *pirs*' opponents to create new approaches and strategies to this tradition.

The Muslim Board tested different methods. When in 1992 haji Nizam, a well-known charismatic leader, managed to restore the shrine of Mir Movsum Aga and to increase his influences, officials from the Board tried to remove him from duty. However, haji Nizam was able to mobilize support from the political sphere and won this battle. Being unable to take over "unofficial" Islam, the strategy of the *sheikh-ul-islam* was turned into the direction of accepting *pirs* and related practices as a part of "official" Islam. As Saroyan argues (1997, pp. 104–124), such an appropriation of shrine pilgrimages by the official clergy used to take place even in the former Soviet Union, despite the wide conviction that these two models of Islam contradicted one another. The Azerbaijani clergy thus appeals to the Shiite tradition, which promotes the veneration of saints, particularly the Imams and their families.

Salafi Muslims who repeatedly manifest their objections and hatred to this "folk stuff," or "superstitions" generally follow a moderate way. Although some cases of Salafi violence towards *pirs* were reported in the past, the main strategies consist in appealing to people. Some of the Salafis endeavour to convince others that all *pir*-related practices are innovations in religion and should therefore be avoided. They want to educate people, make them aware of the re-

3 An interesting story about the origin and history of the shrine can be found in Sharifov (1998).

ligious tenants. Other Salafi groups have accepted the tradition of visiting tombs of important people. Some of them even visit pirs themselves. Pirs for them are sacred, but they are aware that at the tombs one should pray not to a *sayyid*, but directly to God. In that way, a typical strong opposition of Salafis towards "unofficial cults" have undergone changes in the process of competition. Azeri Salafis are too much embedded in local tradition and risk too much in being too radical.

7.2 Demand for Piety and Change

Even though the Shiite establishment possesses a large part of the institutional religious infrastructure, from which it gathers material resources, it has been unable to respond to believers' current needs for spirituality and change. For years, the clergy was more engaged in their own interests than in developing good reciprocal relationships with the faithful. The hierarchical structure did not leave a place for a social dialog. Words that come from above are more like orders than guidelines. What's more, the Board's close links with the communist state apparatus discredited much of its religious teachings in the eyes of average people. This gave opportunities to new religious suppliers whose main asset was the religious capital, i.e., attractive ideas, values, and symbols related to religion. In the ideological vacuum that people felt after the sudden fall of the Soviet Union, there was a need for alternative propositions that could legitimize the social order, give new meanings to life and hope for the future. People who were turning towards Islam searched for religion which can inspire and provide a moral guidance. They looked for a real authority and for leaders they could trust.

Moreover, there has been a demand for religious knowledge, for people educated in Islamic law and theology. One person said that Azerbaijan was not lucky enough to have such an influential religious leader as the Polish people in the figure of Pope John Paul II. The lack of religious professional guidance turned a lot of Azerbaijanis to look for authorities abroad, to countries with long-established and uninterrupted Islamic educational institutions. This demand made it easier for foreign Islamic specialists, as well as Azerbaijanis educated at Islamic universities in other countries, to enter into competition with traditional Islamic leaders in the South Caucasus.

In order to effectively compete with the well-established clergy with its close relations to politicians, representatives of non-local Islamic traditions began to adopt and popularize a modern rule that religious affiliation is a matter of choice. Most of them also accept and preach, to a different degree, reflexiveness in religious matters. To question the existing authorities, one must give their

words serious thought, confront them with one's own critical mind. New religious suppliers encourage people to use their own reason, to study Islamic Scriptures, and to consult them in case of uncertainty. Every Muslim has an obligation to lead an active spiritual life. Apart from rituals, there is a world of God's words that need to be reflected upon. Among younger generations, the Internet, television, and other mass media became extremely popular in search for information about Islam. Thus, those groups that successfully experiment with new ways of communication gain more popularity and have a chance to spread more quickly.

Besides, as the political transformation carried on but without spectacular successes, people became disappointed with the lack of changes in their lives. As a result of wildcat capitalism, a class of businessmen and politicians cooperating with the highest state structures enriched themselves at the expense of others. The Karabakh conflict with Armenia caused a national trauma and resulted in thousands of IDPs who fled from the occupied territory. The semi-authoritarian regime of the Aliyev dynasty made a lot of people sceptical towards politics. Finally, widespread corruption enforced the feeling of frustration. In such circumstances people welcomed religious propositions that avoided political engagement. They proposed focusing on a private sphere and preached ideas of self-perfection, personal piety, and moral development.

7.3 New models of Islam

For Islamic missionaries Azerbaijan as well as other post-Soviet Muslim states were a promising land. The preachers made sudden inroads into the Azerbaijani religious culture when communism was coming to an end. They brought religious knowledge based upon long studies in Islamic jurisprudence. Religious capital was the major asset in the struggle with the class of Shiite clergy for religious primacy. Some groups and movements had also a significant amount of material and political forms of capital at their disposal. Depending on the types and amount of resources, different groups were implementing various strategies in the intra-religious struggle. As the major players have been introduced and characterized in chapter earlier, here I will focus on the main mechanisms of competition.

Iranian Clerics

Clerics arriving from Iran after 1991 posed a sudden threat to the Azerbaijani clergy and to independent Shia preachers. Their main advantage was a much

higher level of education and a deep knowledge of Shia tradition. Using this capital, Shiite Iranians achieved a great success in the first years of independence, but today their influence is limited, although still noticeable. As the Azerbaijani political circles became more restricted and suspicious towards Iranian clerics, the tactic of Iran changed. Instead of sending Shiite preachers to propagate their model of Islam, Iran began offering scholarships and attracting young Azeris to its religious seminaries for studies. The majority of Azeri students went to the holy city Qom to a popular *marǧaʿ at-taqlīd* Ayatollah Fazil Lenkorani, who died in 2007. According to available data, at present there are around 200 – 250 Azeri students in Qom (International Crisis Group, 2008, p. 7). After Lenkorani's death, a lot of his students have turned towards the Grand Ayatollah Makarem Shirasi and other "hardline," orthodox ideologues (Goyushov, 2008). The Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran and the former President (1981 – 1989), is also among the most revered spiritual leaders. According to many sources, he has Azeri roots (e. g., Encyclopedia of the Peoples of Africa and the Middle East, 2009, p. 79), just as Lenkorani. The average length of study is between five and ten years. But there are also shorter options for those lacking enough time or resources. It is estimated that between 1993 – 1996, 300 Azerbaijanis took part in three-month courses in Iran (Goyushov, Askarov, 2010, p. 215).

Apart from providing education and training to young people, Iran's strategy to attract support utilized charity organizations. It established numerous institutions providing humanitarian help alongside promoting the Shiite tradition and —in many cases—the vision, slogans and ideas of Islamic revolution. The massive assistance was directed mainly to Azeri refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh, who were left without any sources for survival, but also to other Azerbaijanis in harsh economic situation. Iran's main aid institution is the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation (IKRF), which functions like many NGOs which provide assistance to the underprivileged. In the south, in Astara, IKRF was helping newly-married couples in buying their own apartment. Besides it distributed food and offered financial support (Hadjyzadeh, 2005b). Inspired by Islamic ideology, Iranian organizations are also involved in building new mosques and madrasas where religious teaching is organized.

In the competition with increasing Sunni influences, more radical Iranian clergy actively attempt to discredit the opponents. They promote and implement the exclusivist model of religious diversity claiming that only Shiism, in their interpretation, is the right Islamic religion. There is a fear in Azerbaijan among moderate Muslims that Iran will recreate sectarian divisions and smash the current relative balance and tolerance. The more chaotic and violent the situation in the Middle East is, the more dangerous the antagonistic calls are. The "Arab Springs" has open a new chapter in the Sunni-Shia relations in many countries.

In Nardaran, one of the chief bastion of Shiism in Azerbaijan, children learn verses that curse the caliph Umar, known in Shia tradition as an unjust usurper. There is also an opinion among Nardaran people that Sunnis are the people who honour Umar—"a very bad man who urged people to marry their brothers or sisters" (Rohoziński, 2005, p. 148). So far, such stereotypical images of Sunnis are more an exception than a norm among Azerbaijanis.

The political aspirations of Iranian clergy that stand in sharp contrast with the secular orientation of the majority of Azerbaijani Muslims have not been welcomed. There are a lot of negative feelings towards Iran, and even some Shiites inspired by Iranian ayatollahs do not approve of their political agenda. I observed that most people accept the secular state with a freedom of choice, which also concerns the controversial issue of hijab. Nayereh Tohidi, who has done her research on gender issues, summons words of an Azeri woman that illustrate the Azeri attitude towards Iranian-style veiling (Tohidi, 2002):

> In June 1992, when a delegation of 22 Islamist women headed by Zehra Mostafavi, daughter of Khomeini, visited Baku, Azerbaijan, wrapped in heavy chadors in the heat of summer, they were met with stares and disdainful reactions everywhere they went. On one occasion, a middle-aged Azeri woman asked, "Do not you feel hot under this heavy black garment in this hot summer?" "But the fire in hell is much hotter if one fails to follow Allah's orders," one of the Iranians replied. Baffled by her response the Azeri woman mumbled, "What a cruel God you have! The Allah that I know is much kinder to women."

Most Azeris today are oriented towards Turkey and, to a lesser degree, towards the Western world. This direction is supported by the political class, that is afraid of potential revolutionary attitudes. Nevertheless, there are still groups which are deeply attached to the Shiite tradition, and for them Iranian scholars constitute a point of reference in religious dilemmas. It can be thus said that, although the threats that Azerbaijan will follow an Iranian way are exaggerated, Iranian ideas appeal to a part of traditional Shiites and to those who have recently been discovering this tradition, particularly in the younger generation.

Independent Shiism

In the competition for souls and minds of believers, independent Shia communities have been gaining relative success. These Shia communities that are functioning outside of the Sheikh-ul-Islam's authority are not numerous, but growing, attracting mostly younger generation who feel that Shiism is an element of their cultural and religious identity. The most influential Shiite leader in Baku is Haji Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, a graduate of an Iranian university. Although

he has lost his institutional attachment, when the authorities banned him from leading the Juma mosque in the old centre of Baku, he continues his work on the reinterpretation of Islamic heritage to be compatible with modern democratic state. His efforts have been appreciated by an international community, which in 2009 announced him to be one of the 500 most influential Muslims in the world (500 Muslims, 2009). The publication praises Ibrahimoglu as a "charismatic young Islamic scholar and human rights activist, who is the head of a pro-Iranian Shia congregation in Baku." While I agree with the first part of the description, the statement that he is pro-Iranian raises doubts. Ibrahimoglu's openly admits that he received his graduate and postgraduate education (*magistratura* and *aspirantura*) from an Iranian university and in his religious teachings he is inspired by Iranian scholars and their interpretation of the Shiite Jafari *maḏhab*. He promotes conservative religiosity in terms of morality and ideas. At the same time the Imam's ideological orientation is rooted in European values, such as the rule of law and freedom of conscious. Among other things he has studied human rights in Poland and is now actively engaged in democratic transformation of Azerbaijan. His activities and rhetoric are directed against corruption, authoritarianism and human rights violations. He's among a few public religious figures that dare to openly criticize the ruling elite. It has earned him respect and made him influential among the urban educated Shia youth.

During a meeting with the female members of his community (during which the Haji left us alone so as not to influence the opinions), I asked about the reason for the popularity of their imam. In the office there were mostly young and middle-aged, educated women, all wearing the hijab. One of them explained Haji Ilgar's attitude, which the members of the community find appealing:

> Haji Ilgar helps us find true information about religion. Obviously, we can search and read ourselves, but he has a great advantage: an objectivity. He is not forcing people to accept his views without any reasons. He is approaching religion in a rational way, shows us the way, gives proof, presents logic behind the religious path. He asks us and himself questions, for instance, whether God exists or not and directs us towards an answer. Sometimes such issues do not even come to our minds.

Rationality in religion is a value most underlined by Ibrahimoglu and appreciated by his followers. Discussions over the Scripture are not only welcomed but also encouraged. The claim that this approach is more intellectual helps the faithful in the competition with other groups, especially Sunni. It situates them at a higher level. "In Sunnism rationalism is not a virtue," the imam said. Among Juma community's main and most vigorous opponents there are: the official Shiite establishment and the Salafis. Unlike the first group, the Juma community does not have "their" mosque to gather and to gain revenues

from it, nor financial revenues. In spite of being expelled from the mosque, on the business card haji Ilgar has written: "Imam of the 'Juma' mosque religious congregation in Icheri-sheher (Old city)."

Concerning the official clergy, he repeats the public criticism: "They used to work for KGB." In his opinion, the Islamic university in Baku has not produced a single person who would know Islam. It forces people to subordinate and see the world in black and white. They are not engaged in spiritual and religious development. Their level of education is not sufficient enough to teach others. Ibrahimoglu's words are uncompromising: "Unlike the state clergy, we are no apparatchiks from the Soviet period who are used by the state to legitimize a corrupt and increasingly authoritarian regime and make a parody of Islam. They preach conformism and resignation" (Cordier, 2008).

Imam Ibrahimoglu works on the project of modernizing the *ʿĀšūrāʾ* celebrations. Blood donations organized by his community are part of wider project of social work—an essential component of a true religion. A component that was missing during the dark ages of communism and needs to be revived and popularized among the faithful. Imam Ibrahimoglu goes further in his reinterpretation of the *ʿĀšūrāʾ* than the official Shiite clerics do. He has called to associate *ʿĀšūrāʾ* Day with values of patriotism and heroism. According to him, the whole *Muḥarram* "embodies such high qualities as courage, invincibility, bravery, devotion and genuine civil position" (Ashura, 2008). This ideology should be also seen in the light of Ibrahimoglu's active engagement in human rights and his fight against abuses of democracy and injustice in politics, which is not only a theoretical problem in Azerbaijan. The Shiite tradition of political struggle is actively developed by the Juma Imam. Moreover, he has set an example of resistance when in 2003 he took part in protests against results of the presidential elections, for which he was imprisoned. Now he heads the DEVAM human rights centre.

Ibrahimoglu also satisfies criteria of a desirable religious leader established by pious traditions: an imam must be first of all knowledgeable. A woman from the Juma group said that the deep knowledge of religion, which mullahs in Azerbaijan are generally lacking, is a prerequisite for being a leader. Other values cherished by the Juma community include morality. "The values such person realizes in life are very important; he must set an example to believers," people said. The next crucial feature is charisma: "He should know how to appeal to people, how to make them follow his path; he needs to have a gift that people eagerly listen to him," I heard from another person.

Another strategy that makes Ibrahimoglu successful is his support for secular law, which is not common in the Shia tradition. He is a strong public advocate of a democratic system. He knows that Azerbaijanis are disappointed with West-

Figure 7.3 *Muhur.* A Shia ritual object used during prayer

ern democratic countries for a variety of reasons, mainly due to the lack of support in democratic transformation. He is not enchanted with European culture all-together, but with some European institutions that are working well. His strategy is to promote a "concept of democracy," not a particular implementation of this model. He explained, "I do not want that people identify democracy with a given state. Most people in Azerbaijan identify it with US. We want to show the truth about democratic regime." At the same time his aim is to change the perception of religion. Imam's followers distinguish between two sides of religion. In their vision of religion there is a "practical" aspect, full of detailed requirements concerning religious pillars, such a *namaz* or hajj. Rituals must be performed with the highest degree of precision. The second is a wider worldview, a moral and philosophical side of religion—"a general striving for good, justice, friendship; a belief in God, the Prophet, Imams, and in God's justice." Haji Ilgar added that Poland is a good example for him. Polish people were often close to the Church to do great things together. Collective actions were based on some shared moral principles, rooted in religion. But not every Pole blindly follows the Vatican. Similarly, Azerbaijanis are inspired by their faith, but do not act as Iran expects. In this manner, the imam distances himself from common accu-

sation of his Sunnis opponents that Shiite Muslims want to change Azerbaijan into an Iranian-like country. In his mind, the Islamic revolution which transformed Iran into a theocratic state is unlikely to take place in his country.

7.4 The Process of Sunnitization

Whereas Shiism is attractive to numerous people in Azerbaijan and constantly attracts new believers, Sunni traditions have managed to successfully compete with it. Increasingly and forcefully they are making inroads into the post-Soviet societies. Initially the new, foreign Sunni groups, movements and organizations were in a rather disadvantageous position compared to the established Islamic structures. They lacked mosques and profits they bring. Nevertheless, the Sunni branch of Islam managed to overcome initial problems. The ongoing process of internal competition leads to the augmentation of religious authority of Sunnism in its various forms. The struggle strengthens the Sunni actors. If the trend continues, it can result in the "Sunnitization" of the society.

Salafism

Sunni traditions respond to two basic social needs among young and middle-aged generations: the need of an attractive piety model and of ideological alternative to an existing social order. All of the new Sunni pious traditions have been promoting an idea of deep and radical changes. It is particularly visible in the case of the Salafi community, that is using these ideas as a kind of a "trademark." Contrary to the popular cliché, the Sunni people I talked to underlined the understanding of religion as a path or a process. It means a constant struggle with moral imperfection, weaknesses and sins (what is sometimes referred to as jihad.) Religious rituals are supposed to direct people towards God and moral perfection. In this tradition, a person who does *namaz* should become a better person after each prayer. Rituals must follow the faith, otherwise they are useless. That is the prevalent discourse among Salafis in Azerbaijan.

As I was told by a local expert on religion, Salafis in Azerbaijan form two distinct groups. One of them focuses mostly on the detailed implementation of Islamic pillars. They mostly care about the dress code, behavior, regular prayers and fast. There is a strong intergroup pressure to subordinate to the socio-religious norms. The other group views both aspects of religion—formal requirements and moral guidance—as equally important. A young Salafi girl working in an Islamic shop in Baku was trying to persuade me that when I accept

Islam my whole life will undergo a revolutionary change. Rituals and symbols are important as they testify to the inner religiosity. They are the proof that one is taking religion seriously, but they are empty without a spiritual development.

When Sofi Bedford conducted her research on Islamic activism in Baku in 2004 – 2005, the number of mosque visitors to the Abu Bakr mosque was surprisingly high in comparison to other Islamic places in the capital. While the majority of Shia mosques were visited by only a handful of believers, this Sunni centre had around 8000 people coming for Juma prayer (Bedford, 2009, p. 105). Most scholars, including Farideh Heyat (2008), confirm its popularity. Friday prayers used to attract thousands of people every week and during religious holidays the numbers were even higher, reaching sometimes over 10,000 people. The faithful were coming even from the north of Azerbaijan.

Today the situation is different, since the mosque had been closed after the terrorist attacks in it in 2008. The Salafis I met in 2009 attend mostly the much smaller Lezgin mosque in Icheri Sheher. However most of their activities are held at private homes. Much of Salafi education seems to be outside of the formal structures. People gather in small groups at homes to study Arabic, Islamic literature and to pray together. Private venues are much more comfortable to discuss views which are not popular. One of my respondents said that she meets with her "sisters" usually two-three times a week. In such loose, informal webs of personal relationships and circles people trust each other. Informality and the small size of the groups enhances solidarity and involvement. In Central Asia there are also reports of Salafi social networks that are crucial in recruitment and mobilization in the community. They gather in teahouses or private houses of the community and members hold lectures or discussions.

The lack of a possibility to gather openly at a mosque has been partially compensated, similarly as in the Juma community case, by the use of a new means of communications, especially the Internet. Both communities are actively getting engaged in on-line discussions. On the forums there is a possibility to consult imams of those groups. This method is especially attractive to young educated people, who constitute the majority of followers of these two movements. Popular way of proselytizing is also the spread of Salafi-like messages through mobile phones.

Especially because of the lack of institutional infrastructure, i.e., a Salafi mosque that could function without restrictions, an important channel in recruiting new members is through social networks. Apart from kinship and friend circles, there are some private companies, which are known as informal centres of Salafism. Their profiles of activity are not linked to religion in any way. One company that I visited deals with occupational training and provides various kinds

of courses in fields as diverse as management, oil and gas, safety and security, or English language. Its boss is a highly successful person with many achievements in business. But he is also valued for his moral characteristics, such as courage in thinking and acting, or resistance to the widespread corruption. He proposes young people a way to success, but also a way of spiritual development based on Islam. For many Muslims his habitus of successful, religious, and knowledgeable person is highly attractive. It appeals to upwardly mobile middle class. In the company's office there is even a room designated for prayer. I was even invited inside to take a look. It's a small and an exceptionally quiet place where one can pray or meditate for a while in a comfortable condition.

The Salafis chief element of religious capital is the simplicity and integrity of their doctrine. Salafi main activists and leaders not only know religion very well and have good education from prestigious Islamic universities, but also know how to present Islam in an attractive way. During a discussion I held with the girl from the shop I mentioned earlier, I suggested that following the Islamic religion must be a tough thing due to numerous rules and obligations. She disagreed and said that it is the other way round: "It is the most true and the simplest way to God." The precision of norms makes a religious path easier. You follow the rules, and you get closer to God. No ambiguities, no shades. At Salafi mosques those people feel comfortable. They are convinced that Islam provides answers to any imaginable question. The rules, described precisely in numerous books available in Azeri and Russian, are easily understood and demanding at the same time. People feel that they have to invest an important part of their life, but they know what they can expect "in return". The Salafi strategy of exclusivism additionally reinforces the conviction that they are following the right, "straight way." A well-developed polemical discourse pointing to numerous "mistakes" found in all non-Salafi traditions is quickly internalized by new followers. A central point in the discourse is the mediation between God and the believers, which is unacceptable for any Sunni. Using this argument, they oppose pilgrimages to holy shrines and at the same time the hierarchy of the Shiite clergy. Another effective Salafi idea used in competition with others is the stress on the universalistic qualities of religion. A lot of my Salafi respondents were reluctant to answer the question whether they identify themselves as Shia or Sunni Muslims. Although their support for Salafism, as well as their opposition to the Shiite tradition, was clearly visible, Salafi Muslims were above all stressing that they are "just Muslims." Their variant of religion is believed to transcend all Islamic sects and traditions.

Salafi preachers from the Gulf States first appeared in the early 1990s. The most popular was Gamet Suleymanov, who was appointed as a first imam of the Abu Bakr mosque in 1998. The mosque was financed by a Kuwaiti organiza-

tion, The Revival of Islamic Heritage, but the mosque's activities were to be covered by the visitors themselves, as the imam assured in a press interview (Gamet, 2008). Suleymanov's main capital was a diploma of the World Islamic University of Medina. One of his supporters described him in the following way: "He is a respected and good scholar, intelligent enough to present arguments in a tangible and right way." Moreover, he has been adapting the Salafi tradition to the secular context of Azerbaijan. Instead of struggling with the Muslim Board over Islamic radicalism, he admitted that the problem exists. Since that time his community is actively acting against it.

An important remark in the discussion over Salafism has been made by a careful observer of this phenomenon, Anar Valiyev (Valiyev, 2008). In his opinion, the presence of a mostly moderate Islamic group and a hostility to religious extremism among Azerbaijani people may influence the Salafi tradition. There are some signs suggesting that Salafi strategies have been changing towards the acceptance of some aspects of secular state with its law. Besides, instead of calls for the politicization of religion, Salafi leaders discourage their followers from engaging in politics. In order to prove that they are also fighting against radicalism, they even expelled from their community Salafi radicals ready to employ all kinds of methods in a struggle against infidels. This move was appreciated by many Salafi Muslims who fear religious extremism and are interested mostly in spiritual and moral aspects of Islamic religion. For many of them secular law is not only acceptable, but they see it as the only possible solution to governance.

Turkish Islam

Apart from Salafism, Sunni Islam is on the rise also due to the Turkish Islam. It benefits from the pro-Turkish sentiments in Azerbaijan. There was not a single day during my stay in Baku without media coverage of Turkey or Azerbaijani-Turkish relations. Abdullah Gül and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan are widely recognized and respected, even in spite of Azerbaijani's opposition to Turkish-Armenian endeavours to normalize their diplomatic and political relations. The recent decline of trust and confidence between Azeri and Turkish politicians has not changed the feeling in society that Turkey is brother country and the natural ally. They speak a similar language and Turkish literature, TV, and movies are easily under-

stood. Turkish soap operas are extremely popular among Azerbaijanis. In the apartment I stayed in, the Turkish channel was on at least few times a week.[4]

The secular character of post-Soviet Azeris creates a demand for a brand of religion that takes into account the tradition of separation between religious and political spheres. Although orthodox Islam does not allow for such distinction, Muslims in many countries have been experiencing with secular governance. Turks, under the leadership of the Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP), set an example to follow. Turkish religious capital was thus built upon the social need for spiritual experience and for respect of secular habits at the same time. Another advantage they possessed in spreading their ideas was a political capital and a proactive attitude of the state authorities in the first phase of the transformation. Although the situation has changed, Turkish missionaries managed to make inroads into the Azerbaijani society.

One might expect that the Sunnism of Salafi and Turkish groups would be an obstacle in a predominantly Shia society. However, the low level of Sunni-Shia competition during communism enabled Sunni preachers to successfully target both groups. Lots of Azeri Shiites are not aware of the theological differences inside Islam. They do not know the history of religious sects. Haifza, who studies law at the Baku State University, comes from a family of secular Muslims. She could not say whether she is a Shia or Sunni, even though she had heard about these groups. When asked about her religious identity, she says she is "more Shia," but could not give any reason for that. But her migration to Baku and subsequent university studies made her more knowledgeable in Islamic traditions. Although she is studying civil law and aspires to become a lawyer in a secular system, she is, indirectly, exposed to religious themes. During lectures and discussions in classes she gradually develops her religious identity. There was a Sunni teacher of law, who, during his course, was indirectly promoting his version of Islam. During one lesson, dealing with an issue irrelevant to Islam, he told students stories about the recent hajj, in which he had participated. In his coverage he was directly discrediting Shiites who took part in the pilgrimage. In his view, they behaved in a crazy way, determined to touch the Black Stone at the corner of the *Kaʿba*. Shiites, according to the teacher, do not pay attention to the people who fall down and die in the crowd. They behave as fanatics, obsessed with fulfilling a ritual. People without heart. People without human instincts. Hafiza was shocked. For her it as a grave sin not to help people

4 Recently the Azeri government took steps against foreign TV series and films. A new regulation prohibiting foreign programs entered into force in May 2012. Allegedly it aims at protecting the local TV industry.

because of a "stone." She did not question his version. A professor's version is more reliable than a simple story. The prestige of a university makes students more trustful towards what they hear during lectures. The teacher also pointed to some paradoxes that characterize Shia Muslims. For instance, they use *muhur*, on which they lay their forehead during *namaz*, because they regard it as a piece of sacred soil from Mecca (in fact, the soil for *muhur* should come from the regions where Shia Imams' tombs are located, not from Mecca). If so, why to take *muhur* to the Holy Land, where everything is sacred—it is not logical, he said. During other lessons, the professor made students more familiar with the Sunni ideology, practice, and, above all, Sunni law. Hafiza and her friends treated the last aspect as a purely theoretical issue, since they are proud of the secular system of law in their country and cannot imagine having the religious law in Azerbaijan. The result of such hidden propaganda is that Hafiza is now convinced to follow the Sunni path in the future, but without forgetting some Shia beliefs, especially the belief in the Twelve Imams.

Turkish activists employ three kinds of capital useful in the intra-religious competition: religious (attractive religious outlook), material (financial support of the Turkish state and independent Turkish businessmen) and political (support of the Azerbaijani government). The political capital turned out to be the least certain, as the Azerbaijani government has recently changed its stance on the issue of foreign religious preachers. Nevertheless, Turkey has taken advantage of initial favourable conditions and provided the funds for eight mosques in Azerbaijan, sent educated clergy that soon attracted a lot of people, and gave scholarships to the Azerbaijani youth for studying in their country. People working today at the Faculty of Theology at Baku State University have clear pro-Turkish inclinations, but not of all of them follow Hanafi rulings that are considered to be characteristic of Turkish Islam. One lecturer, who studied in Turkey for eight years, admitted that he had chosen a Shafii school for himself, but he is open to other schools as well. That was a conscious choice after years of readings and reflections. As in other modern pious traditions, Turkish Islam has been introducing new criteria for authority. High quality religious knowledge is a prerequisite for a religious leader. This scholar is often consulted by people, mostly students, about various practical aspects of Islam. They ask him, for instance, what is the proper way of conducting funeral. He presents answers of different schools, looks for examples, sometimes gives his opinions, which he calls fatwas. When he does not know the answer, he openly admits it. His knowledge and sincerity finds resonance among contemporary believers. The pious traditions must then compete with one another to have as educated and reasonable people as possible. Before the recent political actions that led to a closure of several popular mosques in the capital, the Salafi Abu Bakr mosque with its imams

was most probable number one in regard to the number of believers, but Turkish Sunni mosques altogether might have had even more adherents.

Second channel of spreading of Turkish Islam is through some groups acting independently of Turkish authorities. The most distinct and strong one is the *nurcu*, or, in other words, *fethullahci* network. It does refrain from direct proselytism. Their Islamic missionary activities are more subtle and nuanced. Unlike Salafis, who have entered the public space and public debates, Gülen's followers are discreet. The Nurcular community has a relatively large financial capital coming from businessmen supporting the movement's ideas. The resources enable Gülen's followers to spread his ideas in an unconventional way, mostly through a network of secular schools and universities that they established. They target future elites that are going to take up key positions in governance, military, business, etc. In Azerbaijan, they focus on the main cities and have proved capable of adapting to the urban lifestyle. Azeri students in Turkish schools socialize with Turkish people also outside educational structures. They are encouraged to visit Turkish restaurants, where they can have special discounts. The restaurants are adapted to religious orthodox requirements. There are special rooms with all necessary accessories, where Muslims may do their prayers. At one of the main educational centres of *fethullahci*, Baku Caucasus University, there are not many people wearing Muslim clothes, but their number is on the increase, as a professor from that university told me. This fact is attributed to two factors: first, that will be discussed later, is the unfavourable attitude of the state to religious expression in the public, second results from the movement's strategy of Islam promotion. Fethullah Gülen encourages his followers to use the tactic of *temsil*, which means that a teacher invites to Islam not by speaking about it but merely by example. "There were teenagers in the school identified as elders who were doing *namaz*; we were supposed to consider them models and do everything that they were doing. That is how we all started to pray!" a former student at Fethullah Gülen School said (International Crisis Group, 2008, p. 9).

The distinctive character of *fethullahci*, in regard to the types of capital and strategies, enables the community to pursue their activities without direct struggles with other groups. The target of Gülen's disciples are intelligent young people, whose families can afford to invest a lot of money in their child's education. Therefore, they accept people of different religious or secular backgrounds and shape their habitus during studies. To illustrate how *temsil* is put into practice, I will cite a story of a student of Caucasus University about one teacher that I already knew:

> At that time I was not wearing a hijab. We expected a new teacher of economics. When we entered the class, he turned towards us and said: "Hi guys, I am your new teacher," and he won our affections being so straightforward. We saw in his eyes his good personality. Do you know what "Nur" is? It means light. And there was such a light coming from him, a touch of spirituality.

People close to this tradition do not usually use the label *nurchular* outside their community. They prefer to call themselves simply "Muslims," as Salafis do. They read and study Fethullah Gülen's works and admire his activities in the field of religion and religious dialog. All in all, *fethullahci*'s strategies on the religious marketplace have proved successful. According to Goyushov (2008, p. 75), "thanks to their efforts, several thousand young urban Azeris of Shia origin began adopting Sunnism in the mid-1990s."

Reformist Intellectuals

Azerbaijani Muslim intellectuals constitute another group that contributes to the process of Sunnitization. Although they do not act together, some of their propositions regarding redefinition of Islamic religion, which have already been mentioned, sound similar. The ideas of moderate Islam and a focus on faith and morality instead of orthodox rules and rituals might be appealing to many secular Azerbaijanis. However, apart from their religious capital and a special status in society, they do not possess tangible resources that their competitors have. Besides, the lack of material and social capital influences the weakness of their strategies in targeting the public.

Nevertheless, activists from other Muslim traditions respond to their liberal, reformist and anti-Islamist ideas, trying to prevent their spread in the very beginning. In 2005 a radical group called "Ahli-Beyt" related to the Haji Soltan Ali mosque in Baku declared jihad against Nariman Qasimoglu for his academic approach to convey the message of Islam. Jihad was announced during a sermon in the mosque. According to the scholar, his reformist ideas, placing the main emphasis on the Koran only were for some people inconsistent with Islam. There's a lot of resistance to Qasimoglu's ideas among Shiites, whose tradition he totally rejects. In an informal discussion after an interview at one Shia mosque, an *akhund* and his people strongly reacted to the scholar's name, when I mentioned Qasimoglu's translation of the Koran. The *akhund* called him "America's secret agent." One of men sitting around added that there are various forces in the world which help the "evil spread." Then when I asked them whether Qasimoglu was a Muslim, an *akhund* answered: "Definitely not! He is an agent!" For ortho-

Figure 7.4 Nariman Qasimoglu delivering a lecture on Islam and environment; Baku, October 2009

dox pious Muslims reformist ideas rejecting the ritualistic side of Islam are not acceptable. Nevertheless, there is still a large target group that might be influenced by the local Muslim intellectuals. In public talks on the radio, TV, in essays in daily newspapers they show religion but without Shia accents. It is hard to evaluate now what influence their activities may have in the future, but if they are appreciated they will discourage people from following the Shia way. Thus, they may contribute to the rise of Sunnism among Azerbaijanis.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to demonstrate the process of intra-religious competition between the main actors. In the case of religious suppliers most actively engaged in the struggle for the position on the market, competition leads to some changes in their strategies. Changes that follow involve not only social or structural aspects of religion, but also the content of religious teachings. It is especially clear in the official Shiite establishment which has to face various

opponents representing pious traditions and gaining mass support. Also, the groups and missionaries from abroad have to find their target group and mobilize resources to develop strategies to win as much as possible in the competition. The clear trend that has recently been emerging is the Sunnitization of Azerbaijani Muslims, who had always been strongly exposed to Iranian Shiism. In contrast to the official clerical hierarchy, Sunni suppliers do not possess an extensive institutional infrastructure, and that is why they have to develop other forms of capital, mostly religious (ideas, symbols, values) and social (building and strengthening of authority). It this way they are gradually overthrowing the existing symbolic order, which Bourdieu considers as a prerequisite to winning in the religious field.

Chapter 8
State control: Heretic-Hunting

Competition between religious groups is better understood when seen in a wider context. Competition requires religious traditions to adapt to the pluralistic conditions and to the needs of the faithful. In order to win or survive in a competitive surrounding, religious activists and institutions use their capital and develop new strategies. But there is also another crucial factor determining religion's chances of success—the regulation of the religious sphere by the state apparatus. Religious organizations do not compete on an equal basis for the support of believers. Once there is an official, top-down control on religious tendencies, some groups are labelled as "legal," or "orthodox," while other as "illegal," or "heretic." The post-Soviet Muslim republics have been drafting and implementing religious policies that to various extent try to regulate this sphere according to the planned political scenario.

In Azerbaijan state activities are multifarious. On the one side, there have been attempts at creating an image of a tolerant, democratic, and secular Muslim-majority country. This image is to be spread outside the state's border. It is to be spread among Western officials and politicians as well as among Muslim allies in the world. This image is upheld by the Muslim Board with its official Islamic leaders. In their view there is a unique "non-political and non-radical" religious model—a "special national Azerbaijani brand of Islam" (Bedford, Souleimanov, 2016, p. 1564). For the government this self-image is also a tool in increasing Azerbaijan's soft power. The increasing international aspirations require positive ideas, values and concepts. On the other hand, in the post-1991 period, Azerbaijan has been experimenting with an old strategy of "heretic-hunting,"—it restricts and limits the activities of those religious preachers and their supporters who hold independent or oppositional ideas. Let us examine the evolution of the state religious policy and its consequences for the religious situation.

8.1 Post-Soviet Religious Policy

> The current work presents our nationwide leader Heydar Aliyev as connoisseur of Koran and Islamic sciences, traces back Aliyev's views on Islamic morality and spiritual values as referred to appropriate fragments from Koran, stressing his particular erudition in theological sciences; Dr. Adil Al-Falah carried out a thorough analysis of Aliyev's speeches and reports to authoritative international forums, conferences, held in Baku and other places worldwide, his meetings and discussions with world leaders. Following the results of his

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> analysis, Dr. Al-Falah lays a special emphasis on Aliyev's selfless love to his people, land, religion; the author shows that Heydar Aliyev harshly criticized double standard policies pursued by some great powers with respect to major political problems (al-Falah, 2007, p. 6).

These sentences from an introduction *sheikh-ul-islam* Pashazade wrote in a book on the life and ideology of the former president of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev (died in 2003) point to the use of Islam as an ideological tool in the state's religious policy. It also shows the alliance between official Shiism and the state. In an effort to deal with sudden and vital Islamic resurgence and the influx of Islamic missionaries, the traditional cooperation between Shiite and secular powers has regained its significance. The sheikh expects protection and privileges for his system of "official" Muslims hierarchy of clergy; politicians needed religious legitimization to their public activity. From the security point of view, independent, uncontrolled Islam is a potential source of tensions or even terrorism.

Initial Free Market

This alliance is one of the main differences between Azerbaijan and other post-Soviet Muslim countries, where Sunni Islam has traditionally dominated. Nevertheless, the general course and strategies used in religious policy all over Central Asia and Azerbaijan seem surprisingly similar. The first years after the break-up of the USSR were marked by an introduction of liberal law granting all kinds of religious activists freedom of practice and teaching. None of the religious tradition was officially favoured. Besides, all citizens of the post-Soviet republics were given a choice regarding religion. At that time, Azerbaijan attracted numerous preachers, clerics, and missionaries mainly from neighbouring countries. An intense revival of religious life was felt all over the region.

Although formal rules were absent, state authorities were turning towards various means to influence the religious landscape according to their preferences. Azerbaijan's charismatic president Abulfaz Elcibey (1992–1993), known for his pan-Turkic sympathy, strongly opposed Islam in its Iranian manifestation. He was deeply suspected of Iranian clerics who were coming to Azerbaijan in great numbers. He was even eager to replace Pashazade, but was persuaded not to do so by the Speaker of Parliament Isa Gambar. *Sheikh-ul-islam*'s position improved with Heydar Aliyev's presidency (1993–2003) (Goyushov, 2008). The religious diversity and an activity of new religious suppliers did influence the status the Caucasus Muslim Board. To be able to compete with new actors, this institution undertook some reforms to make cooperation with believers

stronger. Among other things, it began to improve religious education for young candidates eager to become clerics. It was striving to attract young graduates of Islamic universities from abroad, in particular from Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Besides, new branches of the only Azerbaijani Islamic University were opened to produce new clerics that would replace the old cadre usually without any formal education (International Crisis Group, 2008). These reforms, inspired by the need to compete with educated independent Islamic groups, led to an increase in the level of religious education, although in the eyes of competitors it was not sufficient. Haji Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, who holds an Iranian diploma, said that at the Baku Islamic University he had not met any expert in Islamic religion.

When the nationalist, pro-Turkish rule came to an end in 1993, the state became friendlier towards Iran. Heydar Aliyev was showing a more favourable approach to Tehran and also cared about his homeland, the Nakhchivan Autonomous Republic. During his visit to Iran, the president boasted that he has opened around 200 mosques in that Azerbaijani enclave (Świętochowski, 1995). Having gained experience in the communist era (as a KGB general), Heydar Aliyev realized perfectly how serious the religious resurgence was. His strategies were thus based on careful examination of threats and possibilities that religion brings to politics.

Towards Restrictions

After the initial period of freedom, political leaders began to transform their strategies towards the religious sphere. On the one hand, they saw an advantage in the use of Islam as an effective ideological tool and, on the other hand, they were afraid that the rising religiosity in the country would threaten their positions. What Elcibey and Aliyev had in common was their willingness to promote themselves as true committed Muslims. Both of them used every possible opportunity to take part in religious celebrations, and Aliyev even went for an *ʿumra* (lesser pilgrimage) to Mecca as the first political leader from Azerbaijan (Valiyev, 2005).

The attempts to use religion as a tool in state-building were typical of all Central Asian and Caucasian republics. Home-grown Islam, encompassing a range of traditions, customs and values, is one of the main elements in forging new national identity. Islamic values were presented as a part of national heritage and as a platform of cooperation with other Muslim nations. For that reason, religious values were often mixed with national ones. In many mosques portraits of Heydar Aliyev hang on the walls. Such a "nationalistic" variant of Islam has

no place to accommodate foreign ideas or values and that is why they are being challenged.

Gradually political leaders set out a campaign directed against religious movements that were gaining too much strength. One of the first displays of this restrictive policy was connected with the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (IPA), which registered in 1992. It is estimated that its membership reached around 50,000 on the Absheron Penisula (Świętochowski, 1999, p. 6). Soon after its popularity rose, first allegations appeared; the party leadership was accused of mixing religion with politics and as such posing a threat to a secular country. Among others, he was charged with receiving financial support from abroad and serving foreign interests. These attacks finally led to the arrest of some of the party's leaders in 1996, which has practically impeded the IPA's activities.

The regulations and restrictions soon touched not only single organizations. The struggle for a national form of Islam as a part of cultural and ethnic heritage led to eliminating all those actors who had political Islamist aspirations. This idea is being repeatedly underlined by prominent politicians, for example Seyfullayev (2010):

> The secular state building in Azerbaijan is the choice of the citizens. No foreign religious influence can go counter popular belief. It is unacceptable to use religion for political purposes, as the belief in the politicization loses its holiness.

The engagement in politics is seen as the main reason for discriminatory measures undertaken against Ilgar Ibrahimoglu and his Juma mosque community. He is not only an oppositionist and a human rights activist; he was also dangerous as an influential religious leader, who was able to mobilize people around Islamic values. The official accusation after his arrest in 2003 was that he had used religion in achieving political goals, which Azerbaijani law defines as illegal.[1]

All Islamic institutions, including functioning mosques, were put under the jurisdiction of the Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB), an institution which became independent from the state, but informally has retained close links to its authorities. The amendments to religious law from 1996 were perceived by independent clerics as a serious infringement of the law (International Crisis Group, 2008). Activities of foreign religious groups were forbidden and all religious groups and communities were forced to re-register. CMB was made responsible for this registration, which gave it a powerful tool of interference in activities of its competitors. Pashazade, the Board's director, is also in charge of the appoint-

1 Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, Section 3, Chapter 5, Article 85.

ment of official clergy in Azerbaijan. However, the existence of CMB turned out to be not enough to implement religious policy. In 2001 another institution, this time a state organ, was established to manage religious activity—the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA).[2] The official purpose of SCWRA is promotion of religious tolerance. Indeed, for the first time, registration of many religious groups, including Islamic, Christian, Jewish and Jehovah's Witnesses was made possible.

In practice, both institutions have been realizing the same aim: to ensure that influential "heretics" are eliminated. By a heretic I mean, following the word's Greek etymology, a person who makes his own choice. In the post-Soviet context, heretics are people choosing a different variant of religion than what is recommended or imposed on the society by politicians. The exact meaning of the word has been changing, but according to the most recent trend an increasing number of religious groups, movements and figures are included in this category. They are also referred to as "independent groups." In practice, these are all communities that operate outside the jurisdiction and control of the CMB.

The process of increasing state interventions into a religious market continued till 2012. In the period between 2006 – 2008 numerous religious TV programs were cancelled and Koranic courses restricted. The sale of Islamic books and magazines received more attention of Azerbaijani authorities. A number of mosques were closed throughout the country. During my stay in Baku, in October 2009, state officials again attempted at restricting the *aḏān*, which raised a heated debate among the faithful. On that day when I was paying a visit to the Juma mosque community, this news spread quickly and everybody was talking about it. The action was conducted in a very informal way—some mosques received phone calls "from the top" to put an end to loud *aḏān* on claims that it allegedly disturbed the peace. No formal regulation was presented, no one wanted to be blamed for it or even responsible for the decision.

In 2009 new amendments to the religious law were adopted by the Azerbaijani Parliament, introducing stronger administrative control. According to them all leaders of Islamic communities have to be appointed by the state. New rights and privileges were given to local clerics, i. e., "citizens of Azerbaijan who have received their education in Azerbaijan" (Corley, 2009). Only they are entitled to conduct Islamic rituals. This law introduces serious restriction for two groups: foreign movements, groups, leaders and for the Azerbaijanis who have received

2 Similar developments in the relationship between religion and politics have taken place in Georgia and Armenia. Although, according to their constitutions, the church is separated from the state, each of these countries have established government institutions to oversee and regulate religious activity (Charles, 2009).

Islamic education abroad. Even those who were sent abroad for studies through an official state channel, are now deprived of their rights. This trend has been visible for a few years; Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, one of such people, said that now people with foreign diplomas are not respected by state authorities. This law aims at eliminating religious traditions that constitute a threat to the "nationalistic Islamic culture" promoted by the state. Many oppositional Muslims complain that the regulations are directed in particular against representatives of Islamic religion. "In a Muslim country, Jews or Christians have freedom of practice and do not have to obey *sheikh-ul-islam*. The policy is strictly anti-Islamic," a Salafi Muslim complained to me.

Moreover, since 2009 the law bans the "spreading propaganda of religions with violence or by threatening violence, as well as with the purpose of creating racial, national, religious, social hostility and enmity. It is prohibited to spread and propagate religions (religious movements) against the principles of humanity and human dignity" (Corley, 2009b). The lack of clear definitions in legal regulations serves as another method of fighting with all whose activities that are uncomfortable to the state. Salafi people also told me that groups that gather in private homes, as they do, are being harassed by the police. The functionaries interrupt such religious meetings, look for "dangerous" books, ask many questions and sometimes take people with them for further investigation.

Recent actions on the political level involve an attack on Sunni mosques in many regions of Azerbaijan, the so-called hijab ban and the arrest of Islamic clerics and believers. Only in 2009 several mosques, funded by the Turks, have either been closed or subject to demolition. In Ganja a Salafi mosque is out of use. Officials have announced that some of the buildings needed to be repaired, whereas others have been built illegally (Makiri, 2010). The hijab controversy began a year later, in December 2010. The unofficial anti-hijab campaign was led by the Minister of Education, Misir Mardanov. Girls in public schools are indirectly prohibited from wearing headscarves. But even before pious Muslims women wearing hijabs could not work at public universities. Only private ones, at the Khazar University in Baku where I taught for a semester, accepted veiled women. "National Islam" incorporates ethnic traditions but does not leave much place for Islamic religiosity and its symbols. There is no official law regulating it, as there was no law regarding *aḏān*. The efforts of state authorities to control the religious public sphere are rather informal; the pressure on people is exercised in a more subtle way. Some political commentators, such as Zafar Guliyev, consider that this situation is a result of the government's raising "Islamophobia." The authorities are afraid to lead an open war with believers, but at the same time are afraid of their prospective mobilization. The *sheikh-ul-islam* tried to reach a compromise, but also took the government's secularist

side. When asked by journalists in December 2010 to comment on this problem, Pashazade answered that wearing a headscarf "was decided by God and has to be followed by Muslims," but underlined that Azerbaijan's secular "laws cannot be violated, either" (Abbasov, 2011). A mass peaceful protest which was organized in May 2011 was dispersed by police and arrests followed. Next year, in October 2012 another protest—"Freedom for hijab"—took place before the Ministry of Education and again demonstration led to detentions and imprisonment (Norwegian Helsinki Committee, 2015).

Another controversy revolves around the arrest of Islamic clerics. Over the past few years this practice has only intensified. Muslim leaders and some believers are detained and put into prison for various reasons, questioned by the government's opposition. One of the most resounding was the arrest of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan in January 2011. Movsum Samedov was arrested along with some of his colleagues. Also, Shia clerics who had received Iranian education were inconvenient for the ruling elite. Charges put against them include acts of hooliganism and weapon possession. According to observers, such cases of arrests of Muslim leaders have recently become more common. The Norwegian Helsinki Committee, a non-governmental organization dedicated to human right issues, lists the names of 80 political prisoners in Azerbaijan, many of whom are religious figures (Norwegian Helsinki Committee, 2015).

Realizing how negative the government's image among the independent religious communities is, in 2012 authorities undertook reforms. The most significant was the change of leadership of the SCWRA. A new chairman of the Committee was carefully chosen among religiously educated and profession candidates. Elshad Iskenderov who was widely respected among Islamic leaders in Azerbaijan replaced a former president, Hidayat Orujov. The change was meaningful. Orujov was widely regarded as an ignorant on religious issues and the SCWRA's activities under his leadership only deteriorated the Committee's image in the society. Tensions among the state authorities and religious communities escalated and there was no common ground for reconciliation. Iskenderov's appointment brought high expectations for reforms. His CV was seen as a hope for ending the impasse. In the 1990s he was active in Azerbaijani youth organizations and was a natural leader. Islamic leaders view Iskenderov's as a pious Muslim and a knowledgeable and experienced man. He worked, among others, as secretary general of Islamic Conference Youth Forum for Dialogue and Cooperation. As SCWRA's chairman Iskenderov began an active work leading numerous interfaith and dialogue initiatives. He took part in meetings with representatives of other religions from Azerbaijan and abroad at which he praised and promoted a national model of religious tolerance. He has also travelled

widely and attended important events in other countries. Also at home he began networking with local Sunni and Shia communities.

However, an assessment of SCWRA's activities is not optimistic. Positive steps are appreciated and his engagement with religious life noticed. But still the leaders of Independent Islamic groups do not see a radical step in solving major problems that exist between the state and Islamic communities. They judge the situation as stable, but not as improving. The hijab issue is unresolved, Sunni mosques remain closed, and other problems remain untouched. The only thing that has probably improved so far is the Azerbaijan's image abroad (Liles, 2013).

The year 2013 witnessed new amendments to the Law on Religious Freedom approved by the Azerbaijani parliament. The sale of religious materials, such as books or videos, was further restricted and brought under the political control. The requirement to have a "verification mark" issued by the state in practice strengthens the censorship system. There are costly fines as well as imprisonment for the production or distribution of religious literature which was not approved by SCWRA and is thus considered illegal (US Department of State, 2013).

War on Terror

Paradoxically, the events of September 11, 2001 enhanced the state's position in the competition with pious Muslim traditions. The tragedy on the other continent legitimized the ruling regime's practices directed against some Muslim communities in the eyes of society. The Azerbaijani power structures with the aid of official religious establishment successfully use the rhetoric based on a strict division of Islamic groups between the "proper" traditional Islam, constituting an integral element of Azerbaijani culture, and "dangerous" radical Islam, posing a threat to society. Radical Islam was soon labelled as "Wahhabi" Islam, and this description has been popularized in mass media and is now known by virtually every citizen of Azerbaijan. From time to time there are news reports about extremist groups that intend to commit terror acts and destabilize the political situation. The accusations were also made by the official Shiite clergy and the governmental bodies. Independent religious communities claim that the state exaggerates the threat of radicalism to mobilize local and international sympathy for its undemocratic measures taken against certain groups. Nonetheless, the public opinion has generally accepted this rhetoric and holds a very negative view of Wahhabis.

"Do not meet with Wahhabis!" shouted my friend Sughra with horror when I told her that I had arranged a meeting with a member of this group. "We are

afraid of them, because they are terrorists. Our teacher was trying to convince us that not all Wahhabis are terrorists, only some, but I do not know…" She is always afraid of them, especially when they are in the metro. She has one Wahhabi in her family. He joined this group when he came to Baku to study geography at the Baku State University. Sughra's family opposed his decision. For some time, the young man used to visit his relatives and always made an effort to convince them that they had no idea about Islam. Sughra was terrified so much that she did not dare to talk to him at all. He criticized everything. Consequently, the family expelled him from the home and broke all relationships. "Wahhabis claim that only those who behave exactly like them are true Muslims!" she added at the end.

The regime's approach to particular Islamic traditions can be characterized as dynamic and incoherent. Since the beginning of the "war on terror" the main focus of authorities has been members of the Wahhabi tradition. There were several reasons for that. First of all, people identified as "Wahhabis," who prefer to call themselves "Salafi Sunnites," usually follow the stricter Hanbali school of law and thus their habitus is more conservative than that of other Muslims. For that reason, they stand in a clear contrast to secular Muslims with their very moderate approach to religious affairs. Secondly, Salafis are easily identifiable by visual symbols, the most prominent being "beard" and "hijab." Wahhabi men are often referred to by other Azeris as *sakkalilar* (bearded people), or *gara-sakkalilar* (black-bearded people) (Valiyev, 2005). The same symbols distinguish Salafi Muslims in the North Caucasus. "Wahhabi" men have a longish beard with no mustache and, additionally wear trousers of above-ankle length. "Wahhabi" women do not wear traditional loose female head covering (known as *kalaghai*), frequently seen in Azerbaijani mosques and *pirs*, but a hijab covering all hair and body, except for faces and hands. However, while beards together with shorter trousers are unique only for Salafi men, hijabs worn by Salafi women in most cases (except for the most pious believers) resemble a typical hijab that is popular also among pro-Turkish and Shiite Muslims.

Although Salafi-like symbols are not prohibited, beards and short trousers cause unpleasant incidents with the security forces. Salafis complain of how the police treat them. There were cases when Salafi men were caught in the street only for the reason of their symbols, taken to a police station and shaved. As if the state was intending to get rid of public manifestations of religiosity without inquiring into religious ideas and convictions. During a focus group, a Salafi man told me a story of his friend who came back from Medina after five years of studies. He was arrested and forced to choose his "guilt," either involvement in a drug business or something else. After having signed such a statement charges might have been brought against him. The Salafi man himself was

Figure 8.1 The most popular form of hijab worn by some pious Azerbaijani women

once taken to the police for doing *namaz* in a public place. In this case, he only had to sign a document stating that he was not a terrorist.

On the other hand, political regime's approach to Salafis is more nuanced than it may appear. According to Anar Valiyev (2008), Azerbaijani official agencies have not managed to work out a unified strategy to this often-diverse group of people. Wahhabism has not been so far forbidden in the country, and the divisions inside this group are judged in various ways. There are official bodies that would prefer to exclude Salafism from the Azerbaijani religious market; their representatives point to alleged involvement of those Muslims in the fighting in the North Caucasus and Afghanistan. The terrorist act in the Salafi Abu Bakr mosque in 2008 is also given as proof that they are dangerous radicals. However, there are also politicians who do not share this view. The leaders of the State Committee for Work with Religious Associations admit that most of the Salafis are not engaged in violence and anti-state activities. Despite of this opinion, the SCWRA has not managed to re-open the Abu Bakr mosque.

Alongside the struggle with Salafis, state authorities have also undertaken a silent war with Turkish traditions. As it has been mentioned earlier, all foreign preachers are forbidden to lead religious communities in Azerbaijan. It is how-

ever surprising that particularly the Nurcu communities have been discriminated in recent years, despite of their loyalty to the ruling regime. *Sheikh-ul-islam* equated people close to the movement with Salafis as equally dangerous to Islam (International Crisis Group, 2008, p. 9). An argument raised against the *fethullahci* community is the controversy around the leader of the movement, Fethullah Gülen. He was accused of pro-Islamic and anti-state activities and in 1998 departed for the U.S. Although he was acquitted in 2006, his activity still rises doubts among Azerbaijani politicians. People close to the movement are afraid to pronounce Gülen's name in public places in order not to raise suspicion. It seems that the political leaders realized the massive support of mainly young people for pious Sunni traditions and try to prevent this trend as much as they can. They are afraid of social and political mobilization Islamic preaching may unleash.

8.2 Impact of State Regulations

The secular state's interference in religious reality has been constantly increasing. In contrast to almost unregulated market from the first years of 1991 independence, each subsequent move is directed against the freedom of choice and freedom of religious teachings. The visible Islamic revival is triggered, to a large degree, by Sunni pious traditions, which became the main target of government's attacks and restrictions. Organizations and believers of Independent Islam have to adapt their strategies to the new circumstances. They react to the rising level of restrictions and secularist practices of the government.

State suppression leads to unintended consequences. When the law made it more difficult for religious communities to register, they did not stop their activities, but went underground. They operate in private rooms, apartments, shops, offices, etc. According to SCWRA, in 2005 there were around 500 illegal and secret houses of prayer (Hadjy-zadeh, 2005a, p. 9). Many Sunnis who used to attend mosques, which are now closed, told me that they gather from time to time to study Islam in small groups in private apartments. Shiite Juma community holds lectures and discussion not in a mosque space but in a private space. They read and study the Koran privately, on their own.

Another aspect of religious organization is the status of state supported places. As the official Shiite clergy and the state accepted "unofficial" Islam of saint veneration, some of the *pirs* have been taken "under the protection" of the government. They are given right to function more easily than independent mosques. Some *pirs* have even been renovated by the order and patronage of the president of Azerbaijan. For instance, it was Heydar Aliyev's initiative to rebuilt

the famous Bibi Heybet mosque, which is considered to be a *pir* by locals. Now a portrait of the president hangs at its entrance.

Secondly, the symbols of Islam, such as Muslim clothes, undergo change. Since the first attacks on the longer Wahhabi beard, many followers of this tradition have shaved themselves. For some it was their own choice, some were inclined to do so by their employers. Still others had no choice, since they were shaved at police stations during one of a "hunt on beards" campaign. In particular, the disappearance of visible Salafi symbols touched those adherents who are active in politics and influential companies. Several people employed in institutions such as the Ministry for Internal Security, National Security, and some BP's departments are said to be Salafis (Kotecha, 2006, p.13), but they are not recognized by their appearance. The same trend refers to female dress. Alongside arguments that hijab is obligatory for every Muslim woman because Allah in the Koran says so, another approach is gaining popularity among Muslims in Baku. Most women I talked to, even those wearing hijab, underline that it is solely a woman's choice. It must follow from the study of Islam, and the decision to wear it should be made on second thoughts. Even some girls close to the Salafi ideology prefer not to wear hijab and instead to dress in a modest way. They do not want to attract attention, as they were justifying their decision. If the majority of women were wearing Muslim clothes, they would do so as well. Another reason for not wearing hijab is the pressure from teachers and employers. In Baku Caucasus University, for instance, students are sometimes asked to reflect a lot before they cover their heads, and Muslim women in hijab are not accepted as lecturers there, because the university pragmatically tries to avoid any confrontation with state officials. Therefore, in the public space, Islamic symbols are limited and a lot of religious people do not openly demonstrate their piety. Islamic discourse of the main traditions has been reformulated to put an emphasis on modesty instead of on a particular dress code.

Thirdly, Muslims who desire to practice their religion and do not want to conform to the state's policy take under consideration an emigration from Azerbaijan. Although Muslim countries are the first desired place of destination, they consider also Europe. One Salafi man, who has travelled to European countries, said that there are non-Islamic countries where one can practice Islam more freely than in Azerbaijan. Other Muslims radicalize their views and become more prejudiced to any state institution. Although, in my opinion, most religious people in that country support a secular state, the ongoing discrimination of Islam in a Muslim country make some of them change their attitudes. They argue that under the sharia law their religious rights would be guaranteed.

Moreover, state's restrictions in the freedom of the religious market contributed to limiting religious radicalism in the country. In the opinion of local ob-

servers, vestiges of extremist groups are mostly kept under surveillance. From time to time, there are news reports about lawsuits brought against groups accused of terrorist activities. This can probably change in the future, if standard forms of religious practice, such as gathering at mosques, will still be discouraged. Once the religious communities learn to operate underground in the atmosphere of fear, the state cannot be sure of their conformity.

Last but not least, statistics confirm what people sense in Baku. Islamic sentiments and the number of people engaged in Islam are growing. The Islamic resurgence is all the time dynamic and it is hard to predict its scenario. The state's desire to curtail the influence of Islamic activism and radicalism is felt by common Muslims as unfair. Many believers who would prefer to refrain from politics are joining the protests against the authorities' crackdown on hijab or *aḍān*. They join forces against arrests of Islamic figures and allegations made against them. Such a situation incites strong emotions and leads to public discussions and mobilization. Government's "Islamophobia" may, in effect, stoke up Islamic mobilization and turn more and more people towards radical Islamic leaders.

The development of Islam in the Caucasus and in the wider region is a dynamic and contextual phenomenon, a process shaped by various historical and contemporary events. The basic trend that emerges from the analysis is the long dominance of Shiism, continuously challenged by Sunni and distinct Sufi groups and movements, which was weakened after the Russification influences in Azerbaijan and subsequent Soviet rules. In that period, a lessening of intra-religious divisions occurred, and, on the eve of independence, the majority of Muslims were not able to identify themselves as Shia or Sunni. The religious revival that followed has brought competition between local and, most of all, foreign religious actors that engaged in the struggle over defining what does it mean to be a Muslim in the contemporary world. The diverse answers inclined many Azerbaijanis to revive old almost universal antagonisms between Sunnism and Shiism. The competition inside and between these traditions has clearly been turning towards the Sunnis' lead. If the trend continues, traditionally Shiite Azerbaijan may one day become mostly Sunni.

Glossary

aḏān	the Islamic call to prayer
ahl al-bayt	lit. "people of the house," the term is used in reference to the family of Prophet Muhammad
ahl al-kitāb	lit. "people of the Book," the term designates non-Muslims who enjoyed the status of "protected people" (*ahl aḏ-ḏimma*) under the Muslim rule
ahl as-sunna	Sunnites
ākhūnd	Persian name for a Muslim cleric; in Azerbaijan it is the title of a graduate of an Islamic academy or university who can be appointed as head of a mosque
ʿĀšūrāʾ	a Shia Muslim festival celebrated on the 10th day of the Muslim month of *Muḥarram*. It commemorates the martyrdom of Hussein, the grandson of Muhammad in 680 CE. For Sunni Muslims it is a day of fasting
Ātašgāh	(Persian) lit. "home of fire," a Zoroastrian fire temple
bidʿa	innovation in religious practice or doctrine
dār al-ḥarb	lit. "land of war," the term denotes non-Muslim territories where strife for Islam should continue
dār al-īslām	lit. "land of Islam," the term describes states under the Muslim authority, where sharia is enforced
ḏikr	lit. "remembering," ceremonial activity of the recitation of God's name or other short formulas
ǧizya	Islamic tax
ḫānakā	(Persian; in Turkish *tekke*) a Sufi lodge; in Arabic cultural area *zāwiyā*
ḫawāriǧ	radical wing of Salafism in Azerbaijan. The term derives from the fundamentalist Kharijite sect that originated in the seventh century
ḫuṭba	public preaching
iǧtihād	independent reasoning and interpretation of Islamic law
Ithnā ʿashariyya	a branch in Shiism marked by a belief in Twelve Imams; widespread in Iran and Azerbaijan
Jadidism	Muslim intellectual reform movement created in the 19th century on the territory of Russian empire. In the religious sphere, it proposed new (*ǧadid*) methods of Koranic exegesis
Kaʿba	the Muslim shrine in Mecca regarded by the faithful as the holiest site in the world
kāfir; pl. *kuffār*	unbeliever
kalaghai	popular type of female head covering in Azerbaijan, different from the new hijab style
karbalai	the title of a Shia pilgrim who has visited the holy shrines in Karbala in Iraq
ketman	an Islamic doctrine known also as *taqiyya* which permits the concealment and dissimulation of one's religious belief if confronted with the danger of death or injury from persecutors
khanaqah	Sufi lodge
Kurban Bayram	known also as *ʿId al-Aḍḥā*; Muslim holiday of sacrifice
maḏhab	an Islamic school of law, e. g., Hanafite, Hanbalite, Shafiite, Malikite, Jafarite *maḏhab*
marǧaʿ at-taqlīd	lit. "source to imitate," a term used in regard to Shia authority

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masǧid al-ǧumʿa	Friday mosque
mashadi	title of a Shia pilgrim who has gone to Mashad in Iran
mawlā; pl. *mawālī*	lit. "protector, master, client," a term typically used to refer to non-Arab converts to Islam
muftī	scholar who issues fatwas; in Azerbaijan, a deputy of the Caucasus Muslim Board
muhur	piece of clay on which Shia Muslim lay their forehead when praying
muǧtahid	in Iran, a representative of higher stratum of Shiite clergy entitled to the interpretation of Islamic law
murīd	in Sufism, follower of a sheikh
muršid	teacher and spiritual master in Sufism
namaz	(in Persian and Turkish), the Muslim prayer
Novruz	(in Persian it means "New Day"); celebration of the New Year on the first day of spring
pir	Sufi teacher, in Azerbaijan—saint's shrine or sacred place; an equivalent to *mazar* in Central Asia
qāḍī	judge who renders decisions according to the sharia
sakkalilar	lit. "bearded people," or *garasakkalilar*, lit. "black-bearded people," terms used in Azerbaijan to denote Salafi men.
salafiyya	movement that calls for "purification" Islam of all innovations and for return to the practices of Prophet Muhammad and the first generations of Muslims
sayyid	descendant of the Prophet or other Imams' families, but also a saint or great religious scholar
Shakhsey-vakh-sey	in Iran and Azerbaijan, large processions on the 10th day of Muharram to commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussein
sheikh-ul-islam	(in Azeri, şeyx-ül-Islam), title of a religious superior in a Muslim country; in Azerbaijan the sheik-ul-islam is the head of the Caucasus Muslim Board and the highest religious leader officially recognized by the state
taqiyya	religious dissimulation; a principle accepted in the Shia theology
ṭarīqa	Sufi order or "mystical path"
taʿziye	a Perso-Arabic term , a mourning ritual, the "passion play" in which the tragedy of Kerbala is performed
ʿumra	a "lesser pilgrimage" to Mecca that can be undertaken at any time of the year
walī; pl. *awliyā*	lit. "to be near," a friend of God, saint
ziyārat	lit. "visit," a practice of making a pilgrimage to the tombs of venerated saints, scholars, Imams, or their relatives

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