

Published in „Annual Review of the Sociology of Religion" (2012) Volume Three: New Methods in the Sociology of Religion edited by Luigi Berzano and Ole Riss, BRILL

MEASURING MUSLIMS: THE PROBLEMS OF RELIGIOSITY AND INTRA-RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s many sociologists dealing with religious phenomena have been turning towards quantitative research methods. There has been a significant rise in cross-cultural social surveys on religion which aim at gathering comparable data from around the world. More and more general social surveys of public opinion include items dealing with religious beliefs, attendance, trust in religious institutions, levels of orthodoxy, etc. Examples include both national surveys, such as the American General Social Surveys (GSS) or the National Election Studies (NES), Eurobarometer and global studies, e.g., the World Values Survey (WVS), the Pew Research Center that has a section “The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.” However, emergent pictures and diagnosis of religious communities turn out to be inconsistent or, in many cases, contradictory. Even the most sophisticated statistical techniques cannot compensate for the low quality of data. Therefore, the recent wave of research shows signs of sensitivity to methodological problems. It is being underlined that alongside progress in theoretical thinking and in data analysis, more attention should be paid to the way religion is conceptualized and operationalized (Finke, Bader, Polson 2009).

The need for improved measures is especially visible in the social study of Christianity, which constitutes most of research inside this field. While a general classification of believers as Christians is not very problematic, the issue of intra-religious pluralism, i.e., divisions inside a given religion, cause lots of doubts. For example, as Hackett and Lindsay (2008) show, published studies of modern American evangelicalism result in dramatically different pictures of this religious branch and its social and political characteristics. The problem actually begins with defining the evangelical group. There are at least three different methods employed by researchers to identify evangelical respondents: (1) An arbitrary classification of believers into one of the

categories: “evangelical,” “fundamentalist,” or “conservative Protestant”, (2) Respondents’ self-classification, (3) Making distinctions on the basis of the respondent’s declared beliefs on some relevant subjects. Scientists’ choices of different methods affect the ultimate picture of characteristics of a particular religion. Thus, special caution is needed in each step of the measurement process.

The last decade has also brought new challenges in regard to the variety of religions being studied. The so-called “global sociology of religion” focuses not only on Christian traditions developing all over the world, but also on non-Christian religions and on some forms of spirituality that can hardly be called religion. In order to ensure comparability of studies between diverse religions, one of the solutions is to use simple and similar measures of beliefs, behavior or belonging. Such a strategy does not take into consideration the influence of political, economic, and social contexts on people’s theological ideas and the variety of meanings people attach to religious concepts.

In this paper I shall discuss measurement challenges with regard to Islamic religion. I came across this problem during my Ph.D. project on Islam in contemporary Azerbaijan (Wiktor-Mach, 2010). While I was analyzing quantitative data from a few available social surveys, I noticed serious discrepancies between that kind of data and the data I gathered in the field research. Social scientists using survey methods in evaluating the religious situation and the level of religiousness tend to simplify research questions and therefore the socio-religious reality. My aim here is to narrow the methodological discussion to two crucial concepts in the current scholarship on religion: religiosity and plurality. My focus will be on the quantitative research on Islam conducted in the last decade in Azerbaijan—a secular, Muslim-majority country which has been experiencing religious revival for over a decade.¹ It constitutes an interesting example of what in the American case is called a “religious market”, i.e, the situation where divergent religious groups coexist and compete for the souls and minds of believers. Azeri experience can shed some light on the problem of religious identification and the dynamics of a religious situation.

Three main research questions will be addressed: (1) To what extent does the concept of religiosity used in quantitative projects reflect the empirical sphere of religious expressions? (2) How is the concept of

¹ For an overview of the history of religion in Azerbaijan see, e.g., Yunusov (2004).

pluralism defined in studies on the Islamic religion? Do researchers pay attention to the issue of religious diversity? (3) In what ways can anthropological projects enhance the study of Islamic religion? In targeting these areas, I will refer to my own data from interviews and participant observation and I will indicate the weak points in the methodologies employed.

Azerbaijan is a perfect case study for exploring the problems of measuring Islamic religiosity. Since the seventh century, the “Land of Fire,” as Azerbaijan is often called, has been closely linked with Islam. However, “Azeri Islam” does not resemble Islam observed in the Arab world. The first difference lies in the ethnic identity—the Azerbaijanis belong to the ethno-linguistic Turkic group, which includes Turks, Tatars, Uzbeks and many others. The second difference grows from the Shia character of Azeri Islam. Azerbaijan, for many centuries, shared its history with Iran and till nowadays both countries have more Shia than Sunni believers. Thirdly, decades of forced communism loosened people’s links with religion. The official ideological doctrine was called “scientific atheism” and treated religion as a vestige that was not supposed to exist, at least in the public sphere. It was not uncommon to meet a self-declared “Muslim” who hardly ever visited a mosque. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Islamic missionary groups began to appear in the Caucasus. They have been promoting various models of religiosity and religious identity. Many Azerbaijanis are rediscovering the religion of their ancestors in a process that is often labeled “Islamic revival.” The term “Muslim” may signify a lot of things and thus caution is required while dealing with such broad categories.

Sociological research on religion in Muslim states is a relatively new undertaking. Scientists in most Soviet countries either did not engage in the social study of religion or were searching for “proof” of communist theses. In Azerbaijan a change occurred shortly after 1991, when the country regained independence. Among the most valuable quantitative studies on religion in Azerbaijan are: “Religiosity in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: Peculiarities, Dynamics, and Tendencies (A Sociological Analysis),” a research report prepared by Tair Faradov (2001); a sociological survey conducted in 2003 by the Institute of Peace and Democracy (Yunusov 2004); “State of Religion and Religion and State in Azerbaijan after September 11,” organized by the Far Center: Economic and Political Research in 2004 (Hadjy-zadeh 2005a, Hadjy-zadeh 2005b). Among recent sociological studies that include some questions referring to religion, I shall cite the following: “Azerbaijan in

2008. Sociological Monitoring. Comparative analysis of findings of sociological surveys held in the Republic by totals of 2006, 2007, and 2008,” an opinion poll conducted by Gallup (Crabtree, Pelham 2009), and “Religiosity and Trust in Religious Institutions: Tales from the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia)” by Robia Charles (2009). In addition, I have analyzed some data on religious attitudes in Azerbaijan collected by the Caucasus Research Resource Center.

THE CONCEPT OF RELIGIOSITY

For religion to have predictive power it is not enough to attach the “religious” label to respondents. Nor is defining someone as a “Jew,” “Buddhist,” or “Christian” valuable in researching social aspects and effects of religion. Poland, for instance, is considered to be one of the most homogeneous countries in Europe in regard to religion. Almost 90% of Poles belong, at least formally, to the Catholic Church. Obviously, it does not translate directly into particular attitudes or patterns of behavior. In elections most people vote rather on the basis of their interests and political ideologies than according to the Church’s teachings and guidance. Another example can be found among Muslims in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Since the early 1990s there are six independent states with Muslim majorities in the region. According to the data from 2004, on average, 80% of the population in this region were counted as Muslims. In Azerbaijan this percentage was higher—93,4% (De Cordier 2008) or even 99,4% (Pew Research Center 2009: 28). However, in that context the label “Muslim” signifies a lot of different, often contradictory, social and religious attitudes. After decades of forced emancipation, many Muslim women do not wear the hijab or any other kind of Islamic dress. Most Muslims in Central Asia do not follow the Five Pillars of Islam, which are considered to be obligatory by orthodox believers.

How do researchers cope with measuring religion and religiosity? How do they make judgments about the level and character of religiosity? Do the concepts of religion employed in the studies reflect the empirical reality? In one of the most common approaches, a simple model measuring only one component of religiosity is employed. The dimensions used in the evaluation of religiosity vary—in some cases it is a participatory dimension (e.g., taking part in rituals, cults; attendance at holy places; chosen religious behaviour or practice), in some,

religiousness is inferred from the subjective importance of religion (e.g., how important is religion in people's lives), in other studies, the level and content of religious beliefs and ideas (knowledge of religious history, symbols, ideas, concepts, etc.) is taken into consideration.

ARE AZERBAIJANIS THE MOST "SECULAR MUSLIMS"?

Such a strategy of relying on solely one indicator of religiosity is utilized in some projects by Gallup—one of the most reliable polling organizations. Since 1995 it has been conducting the World Poll, which surveys people in over 140 countries. Among others, questions include a religious factor and, as a result, a world map of religiosity is systematically being created. In this study, Gallup used only one indicator, namely the subjective importance of religion. Using a standard set of questions ensures simplicity that makes it easier to compare believers of various faiths and traditions without engaging in debates on religious concepts and ideas.²

Table 1. 11 Least Religious Countries.

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

Source: Crabtree, Pelham (2009).

² However, it must be mentioned that Gallup constantly works on improving its methodology for worldwide research. For instance, in some regions of the world Gallup asks supplementary questions specific to a particular country.

According to Gallup's classification presented in Table 1, Azerbaijan is regarded as one of the most secular countries in the world, along with Scandinavian countries, the Czech Republic, Hong Kong, Japan and some countries that formed parts of the Soviet block. In this comparison contemporary Azerbaijan turns out to be the most secular in the whole Muslim world and has thus been called the "bridgehead of secularism" (Shaffer 2004). Only 21% of Azeris declared that religion is important in their lives, whereas for instance in Egypt the whole population is religious. Can one question indicating importance of religion properly describe religiosity all over the world? Do other statistics confirm this pattern?

On the one hand, secular outlooks and ways of life enjoy great popularity among Azeris. Except for a few Islamist organizations, nobody in Azerbaijan calls for the introduction of Sharia law as the state law, as it is in neighbouring Iran. People dress in Russian style and the new Islamic veiling among Caucasian women is widely seen as alien. However, secular in this context must be properly understood. In the most secularized Muslim republic, the term secular is not a synonym of non-religious. Data collected by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) shed more light on socio-religious phenomena in the Caucasus. CRRC is a network of research centers that specializes in analyzing social, economic and political processes in Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Since 2004 this institution has been conducting nationwide surveys—first known as "Data Initiative," then as "Caucasus Barometer"—that include some questions on religious issues. One of them is supposed to measure the subjective importance of religion. In 2010 the question was asked as follows: "How important is religion in your daily life?" People could choose among four options: (1) "Not at all important," (2) "Not very important," (3) "Rather important," (4) "Very important." This question was asked only to respondents who identified themselves as members of a religious denomination. In Azerbaijan it meant almost the whole population, as 98% of respondents answered that they adhered to the Islamic religion. As shown in Table 2, the percentage of people for whom religion is important (rather important and very important) is 71. Only 5% chose the answer: "Religion is not important." This result is clearly at odds with Gallup's results, which indicated that only 21% of the Azerbaijani citizenship regard religion as a vital force in their lives. It is probable that in Gallup's study those respondents who did not express very much religiosity or exhibited only partial links with religion did not choose the option: "Religion is an important part of my daily life." Therefore, the first lesson for

Table 2. Importance that the Azerbaijanis attach to religion.

How important is religion in your daily life?	(%)
People who regard religion as very important	28
People who regard religion as rather important	43
People who regard religion as less important	22
People who do not regard religion as important	5

Source: CRRC, "Caucasus Barometer" 2010.

creating religiosity surveys is to give interviewees more than one opportunity to position themselves.

ATTENDING HOLY PLACES

Data collected by the CRRC suggest another interesting point. Survey findings summarized in Table 3, 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 fulfill 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 Muslims the few Sunni mosques in Baku are too small to accommodate everybody.

Table 3. The percentage of people in Azerbaijan following religious practices. The data are classified according to the frequency of a given practice.

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%

Source: Data Initiative CRRC (2007–2008).

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 not 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 (Table 3) 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.

Other research findings suggest that the answers Azeri respondents gave to the above question referred mostly to mosques, not to *pirs*. In the CRRC survey, almost 11% of respondents said they visit "holy places" at least once a week. This pattern is confirmed by other research, where the question more precisely addresses mosques. According to the Institute of Peace and Democracy's sociological survey conducted in 2003 (Yunusov 2004: 273–285), 12% of Azeris attend mosques regularly. Tair Faradov's (2001) findings also show that nearly 10% of Azerbaijanis pray at mosques at least once a week. Faradov's survey, however, included the "folk" aspect in the indicators of religiosity. Apart from asking about mosque attendance, he posed the question whether people had visited *pirs*. Around 17% of respondents answered positively to that question. It would be worth checking how many people visit *pirs* regularly, since a single visit does not really confirm a high level of religiosity. Many people I met at *pirs* in the Apsheron Peninsula admitted to making *ziyarats* a few times per year. The most popular *pirs* attract hundreds of people every week, especially on Sundays, which is a non-working day. Nevertheless, Muslims who make regular visits to such non-orthodox places and pray at the tombs, give alms and ask saints for help should be included in the category "religious people,"

and not in— “unbelievers,” even if Muslims representing other traditions do not regard such people as “real Muslims.”

Ambivalent findings on religiosity in Azerbaijan need to be analyzed with respect to local history and current developments. There are two crucial processes taking place in the religious sphere of Azeri Muslims. One of them is the maintenance of what I call the secularized Muslim tradition (Wiktor-Mach 2010). This perspective has its roots in pre-Soviet Russian influences on Azeri society, and then was reinforced by Soviet modernization and the campaign against public expression of religiousness. As a result of long processes, the majority of contemporary Azerbaijanis consider themselves to be Muslims, but do not treat this identity as a solely religious one. Being a Muslim in the whole Caucasian and Central Asian context relates first of all to ethnic

Table 4. The percentage of people who visit pirs, mosques, or churches. The data are organized according to the frequency of visit to the particular holy place.

Have you visited <i>pirs</i> ?	
No, I have not	73.3%
Yes, I have	17.4%
I would like to visit	9.4%
How often do you visit mosques?	
Constantly	6.3%
Every Friday	2.9%
From time to time	25.5%
Only on holidays and special occasions	26.3%
Never	39.1%
How often do you visit churches?	
Constantly	0.5%
Several times a month	0.6%
Several times a year	3.3%
Only on holidays and special occasions	3.6%
Never	92%

Source: Faradov (2001).

identity and local traditions. Secular tradition is not, nonetheless, a synonym of an atheistic or agnostic or irreligious way of life. Secularization of Azeri Muslims refers to occasional, selective religious practice, a low level of public expression of religiosity, privatization of faith, general belief in God, but without deep knowledge of Islam and Islamic law. The second process—recent and dynamic—consists in the rising popularity of Islamic revival movements in post-Soviet societies. They have inspired a heated debate on what it means to be a “real” Muslim. This problem will be analyzed in the next section devoted to Islamic diversity.

ONE OR MANY ISLAM? THE PROBLEM OF INTRA-RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

There are basically three different approaches to religious diversity. The first, still very common especially in sociology, tends to divide the religious sphere into groups of believers belonging to the same religion. All members sharing the same religion, e.g., Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, are supposed to have some characteristics typical only of them and thus distinguishing one religious community from others. In this perspective, Azeri society would be regarded as a religious and cultural monolith consisting mostly of believers in Allah. All surveys show that in Azerbaijan over 90% of inhabitants identify themselves as Muslims. For instance, in one of the largest sociological surveys on religiosity by Tair Faradov (2001), 94% of respondents declared an Islamic identity. Table 5 presents the results—Azerbaijan can be classified as a homogeneous country in respect to religious diversity. Orthodox Christians, the largest non-Muslim religious group, constitute only 3,5% of all people living in this country. Besides, there is a small community of Jews and some marginal—from a statistical point of view—groups of Lutherans, Baptists and Catholics (grouped together in the category “other religions.”) In this perspective all kinds of intra-religious differences are neglected. In fact, most general social surveys do not include questions on specific religious denomination. The only thing that matters is the general affiliation with one religion or another. It does not help much in exploring social attitudes, political preferences or the economic behaviour of religious people.

The second perspective on the problem of religious diversity is often noticeable in political sciences as well as in the media. Unlike the first

Table 5. Religious affiliations in Azerbaijan.

Which religion do respondents follow? (%)	
Islam	94
Orthodox Christianity	3.5
Judaism	1.2
Other religions	1

Source: Faradov 2001.

approach, here the internal divisions among Muslims are noticed and underlined. However, the focus is on those groups that have political or geopolitical relevance. Media coverage of Islamic issues in post-Soviet Muslim countries usually employs simple dichotomous discrepancies between so-called “traditional” and “fundamentalist” Islam. This classification certainly reduces the empirical social reality. Traditionally-oriented Muslims are regarded in this framework as “liberal,” “tolerant,” “state-friendly.” Fundamentalists are portrayed as “backward,” “extremist,” or “terrorist.” Political authorities label all groups of religious Muslims that do not support the state as Islamists or, more commonly, Wahhabis—a synonym of dangerous religious fanatics. Political scientists and analysts observe the religious sphere in the light of the state’s security and also focus on Islamic radicalism, thus creating an impression of constant Islamic threat. In fact, they encounter difficulties in estimating the numbers of the Wahhabi religious strain. Asking people in surveys about their affiliation with a Wahhabi group seems pointless, as the findings cannot be regarded as reliable. One of the reasons is the politicization of the term “Wahhabi.” It is employed to describe Muslims following Sunni orthodox Islam, which in the 1990s became popular, especially among the younger generation. Those people attracted by charismatic imams hardly every use the word “Wahhabi” but call themselves “Salafi,” “(real) Muslims,” or “*Ahl al-sunna*.³ This movement has been gradually increasing, despite an unfavorable political climate for such reformist groups. Media news tends to underline all negative instances involving a person that can be described

³ The global *Salafiyya* movement calls for the “purification” of Islam from all innovations, such as elements of local cultures, traditions and religions, and for a return to the practices of Prophet Muhammad and the first pious generations of Sunni Muslims.

as Wahhabi. However, in reality the Salafi community is not homogeneous. While the majority of Azeri Salafi followers are people focused on Islamic spirituality, morality and religious experience, there is a small, radical group called *hawarig* (“the expelled”), who rebelled against the leader of the Salafi community, reportedly because of his compromises with political authorities and moderation in attitudes. Salafis are easily recognized, as Azeri terms used to denote Salafi men suggest: *sakkalilar*, which literally means “bearded people,” or *garasak-kalilar*, meaning “black-bearded people.” The beard is one of the most visible symbols of this group; the second, which distinguishes them from other Muslims—is shorter trousers. Salafis claim that Muhammad used to dress in this way and all his deeds are the best example for them. Most reports and opinions on Salafis create an impression in society that every Muslim with a beard and short trousers or, in the case of women, in a hijab, is potentially dangerous. This situation partially explains why in the opinion poll only 0.3% of respondents admitted to participating in the “Wahhabi” Islamic movement (Hadjy-zadeh 2005), which, judging solely from the popularity of Salafi mosques, seems unreliable.

The third approach to the issue of pluralism in religion refers to the existence of numerous denominations, branches and sects. In Islam the division between Sunni and Shia Muslims is the most common, as most smaller sects belong to one of these denominations. Azerbaijan is typically portrayed as a Shiite country. It is thus often assumed that Azeri Muslims resemble Iranians, where also Twelver Shiism dominates. Shiite tradition in Azerbaijan is evident in some symbols (such as images of Ali and Husain displayed in many public spaces), specifically Shiite rituals (e.g., *muharram* ceremonies), unique organizational patterns, belief in the Hidden Imam, etc. Is the common knowledge about Shiite Azeri Islam supported by empirical evidence? Do Azeri Muslims resemble Iranian Shiites? In fact, in Azerbaijan there are only a few enclaves where the local population clearly demonstrates Shiite religiosity. Jerzy Rohoziński (2005), who has conducted research in one of such places—Nardaran, which is a village near Baku known for its religious conservatism and orthodoxy—argues that the Azeri Shiite population is far from accepting Iran as a spiritual and ideological patron. Contrary to common perception, even people from Nardaran do not feel attracted to Iranians, whom they perceive as unmoral and slow-witted. Despite the fact that Azerbaijan shared a long history with Iran, more recent Russian, Turkish, Arab and European influences led

to vital changes in the patterns of Azeri Shiism. Therefore, no valid conclusion can be drawn from a simple comparison of religion in Iran and Azerbaijan.

As has already been mentioned, in most research and reports on religion and society there is no inquiry into specific denominations. General classification of people into different religious groups—Muslims, Christians, Jews, etc.—is usually regarded as sufficient in presenting a picture of the society's religious diversity. Among the few exceptions of sociological quantitative research that explore the issue of the proportion of Sunni and Shia Muslims, there is the Far Center's survey (Hadjy-zadeh 2005a, Hadjy-zadeh 2005b) and the opinion poll of the Institute of Peace and Democracy (Yunusov 2004). The results that both studies have discovered are astonishing, at least for an external observer. It turned out that the Shiites constitute almost 30% and the Sunnites little less than 10% of all believers. The rest, excluding members of other religions, declared themselves to be "Muslims." With such findings, questions arise whether the "Muslim" category is homogeneous in respect to religious patterns. Respondents who self-identified as "Muslims" may exhibit some typical Sunni or Shia beliefs, practices or symbols (e.g., the Twelver Shia belief in the Imams), or may lack any details that could serve as a basis for religious differentiation. In the post-Soviet context both hypotheses are plausible. Decades of "scientific atheism" promoted by the Soviets have affected the contents of religious beliefs and ideas. One of the most common interpretations of Islam in contemporary Azerbaijan is based on moral values, such as being a good, just, sincere person. Many "secularized" Muslims show respect for some religious rules, such as dietary regulations (e.g., abstinence from alcohol, avoiding *haram* food), and a general belief in God. There are also people declaring Muslim identity who do not care about such restrictions. For them Islam is an important part of their cultural and national heritage and they call themselves Muslims because they belong to the Azerbaijani nation and differentiate themselves from Christian neighbours, such as Russians and Armenians.

However, during my interviews and informal conversations some people who called themselves "Muslims," and not "Shias," added that they are waiting for the Hidden Imam, which is one of the most typical Shia beliefs. They also possess Shia ritual objects, such as the *muhur* (a piece of clay on which Shia Muslims lay their forehead when praying) and tell stories about pilgrimages to Meshed (Iran) and Karbala (Iraq), revered in the Shiite tradition. Those issues need developing in future

Table 6. Religious denominations in Azerbaijan.

Which religion—and which of its branches do you represent?	(%)
The question was asked only to those who declared to be “believers” (97%)	
Islam	56
Christianity	0.8
Shiism	28
Sunni	8
Orthodox	2
Judaism	0.3
Nurchu	0.3
Vahhabi	0.3
Other religions	0.4

Source: Far Center 2005.

research. By the middle 1990s, around 3,000 Azerbaijanis had gone to Mecca, another 3,000 to Karbala, and almost 300,000 to Meshed (Trofimov 1996). These statistics supply an additional reason why inquiring solely about the *hajj* to Mecca would not give precise information about Azeri Muslims’ pilgrimages to sacred places and religious practices. As a sign of respect those pilgrims are granted honorific titles in their societies: *Hajji*, *Kerbalay* and *Meshedi* respectively. Shiites consider Karbala and Meshed to be among the holiest places on earth; the former contains the tomb of Husayn (a Shiite leader from the early age of Islam and the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad), while the latter is a burial place of Ali ar-Rida (the eighth Imam in the tradition of Twelver Shiism).

ANTHROPOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTION

In order to properly formulate research questions that are understandable to respondents and to create valid indicators of interesting phenomenon, a valuable contribution can be obtained from the related field of social anthropology. Qualitative data can give us some insight into the complex social worlds as perceived by their participants, with all the ambiguities and the “institutionally diffuse” phenomena, as Thomas Luckmann put it in “The Invisible Religion” (1967). Fieldwork

on religion and participant observation in a Muslim environment usually lead to questioning popular schemes of interpretations and opposing common explanations. Before Inna Naroditskaya (2004) arrived at Baku to do research on music and religion, she had been informed by some local people that dervishes no longer existed. She also recalls her meeting with an imam at the main mosque in Baku, known as the Taza Pir mosque. Hajji Jabrail Mikail Oglu opened the discussion by reminding the scientist that religious Muslims are strongly discouraged from listening to music (which I have also heard numerous times from pious Muslims). Naroditskaya was almost ready to give up, when suddenly, the imam remarked that *mugham* is not music. He handed over a video recording of wedding celebrations with *mugham* songs performed by himself. This puzzling event shows how difficult research can be when a social, cultural and political context is not well known. In a survey on music and religion, the above-mentioned imam would probably say that he did not listen to music or perform it, but at the same time he was actively engaged in *mugham*, which is widely regarded as the Azerbaijani classical music, related to Sufi traditions.

Another interesting anthropological work on contemporary Azerbaijan was written by an Iranian Azeri who emigrated to the United Kingdom—Farideh Heyat (2002, 2008). Her intercultural experience and knowledge of the Azeri culture enabled her to successfully challenge existing stereotypes and assumptions about women's lives and gender politics in the Caucasian republic. Her interviews with women who had recently adopted Islamic veiling shed light on the complex process of Islamic revival that marks the most recent decade of the Azeri history.

During my own field research in Baku in 2009 (Wiktor-Mach 2010), I noticed the lack of appropriate frameworks to analyze different Islamic manifestations. The dominant perspective on Islam in the Caucasus in academic writings revolved around simple dichotomies, such as: "official" versus "unofficial," "parallel," or "folk" Islam; and the more recent distinction between "traditional" and "fundamentalist" Islam. The former dichotomy made some sense during Soviet experiments with the religious sphere. As one of the most respected anthropologists of the Caucasus, Mark Saroyan (1997) has argued on the basis of literature from Soviet times and his own observations, the sharp distinctions between the institution of a mosque representing official Islam and a *pir* commonly associated with an unofficial form of religion which were noticeable in the past. Unlike formal Islamic shrines, *pirs*

were open for pilgrims at any time. Secondly, while mosques were typically associated with urban spaces, most of the *pirs* were situated outside city centres or on the outskirts of cities. Gender practices too strengthened this division: mosques attracted mostly men, whereas *pirs* were the domain of women, who sometimes hold leadership positions as shrine guardians (*pir sahibi*). Finally, another crucial aspect distinguishing mosques and *pirs* lies on the level of formality. Prayer at mosques, and especially during Friday communal gatherings, is highly regulated and led by a Muslim official—imam or *akhund*. At *pirs*, on the contrary, rituals have more spontaneous and individualized character, with no fixed time or day for a visit and no formalized guidance by the Islamic clergy.

The division of the religious landscape into Sunnism and Shiism was also unsatisfactory. Inside each of these groups I noticed huge divides and rivalry. Inside both Sunni and Shia communities Muslim identity constitutes an issue of intense debate. Although an average Muslim would insist that Islam is only one and being a Muslim involves numerous clearly defined rights and privileges, social scientists must carefully analyze empirical patterns of behaviour and modes of thought. In the sociology of religion for a long time stress was placed upon consolidating functions of religion. There is, however, another strand of sociological thinking interested in exploring religious conflict. In this approach, the religious field is seen as being sensitive to both in-group and out-group distinctions, such as proper versus improper, saved versus unsaved (Davidson 1998), orthodox and heterodox.

For instance, conservative Protestants in America are known for their variety of denominations and movements. More problems arise from the fact that particular communities do not agree on any one label or set of beliefs. For that reason, a number of scholars avoid arbitrary dividing lines (such as “conservatives,” “moderates” or “liberals”), preferring to distinguish the main identifiably historical traditions inside conservative Protestantism, namely “evangelical” and “mainline” Protestants. This way of thinking I find useful in discussing Islamic religion as well. At the beginning of my research I consulted some Azeri Muslims to find out about the usefulness of categories such as “modern,” “conservative” or “liberal” Muslims. The people were confused since in Azerbaijan there is no clear tradition such as “liberal Islam,” to refer to. In the late 19th century there was a modernist movement of Muslim intellectuals widely known as *Jadidism*. Its ideas spread among Tatars, Bashkirs and other Muslim communities of the Volga

and Ural regions (Yunusov 2004: 121). The first generations of Azerbaijani elites, inspired by Russian civilization, collaborated on reform projects. However, this “modernist Islam” gained support only among few Azeri intellectuals and so it has remained: ideas of modernism in Islam are upheld by a part of the Muslim elite. For the average Muslim in Azerbaijan, the word *Jadidism* has no meaning.

In contrast, the terms “Liberal” or “Reform” Judaism hold actual connotations related to specific histories, leaders, texts, events of those separate movements. Therefore, there is not much use in asking Caucasian Muslims whether they consider themselves to be “conservative” or “reformist” Muslims. The first task is to identify trends, movements and discourses in the society, to find out the popular histories and myths people refer to, to get acquainted with language used in expressing the religious sphere. Such a bottom-up anthropological approach is a necessary step in developing appropriate measures for quantitative research, especially when a particular religion is either not well researched by sociologists (as is still the case for most non-Christian religions) or when a religious sphere is experiencing drastic changes.

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