

Religiosity in Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan

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Abstract

This article examines the nature of religiosity in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Annual nationwide survey data results from the Caucasus Barometer (CB) in 2008 and 2007 show that religious practice as measured by service attendance, fasting and prayer are low throughout the region, similar to levels found in Western Europe. However, religious affiliation, the importance of religion in one's daily life and trust in religious institutions is high in all three countries. This provides support for understanding religiosity as a multidimensional concept.

Little Practice, But Strong Affiliation

This article examines religiosity among populations in Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. It also provides support for understanding religiosity as a multidimensional concept.

Many countries of the post-communist region, including the three countries of the South Caucasus, have populations with low levels of religiosity as measured by religious practices such as attendance at religious services, fasting and prayer. Nevertheless, many of these countries have high levels of subjective forms of religiosity, including religious affiliation, trust in religious institutions and the importance of religion in one's daily life. Therefore, different indicators of religiosity measure different aspects of the same concept. The seemingly contradictory nature of religiosity in Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan is a common feature throughout the post-communist region and it also sets the region apart from the rest of the world.

The combination of low levels of religious practice with high levels of subjective forms of religiosity is a Soviet legacy and is partially due to the nature of Soviet state policies toward religion over time. There is not room here to discuss the current character of states in the South Caucasus, which each have their own variety of state secularism and relationship with religion (I will examine this issue in a forthcoming article). However, a brief discussion of Soviet state policies toward religion is necessary to understand how the past affects the present.

The Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) worked to eradicate religion; however, constantly changing social, political and economic considerations influenced the formation and execution of religious policy. Thus, initially the Soviet state sought to extirpate religious institutions and belief, especially from 1929 to 1939. However, the state subsequently established a compromise with religion under Stalin as the Soviet Union sought to use religion as a mobilization tool following its entry into World War II in 1941. A mix of religious freedoms, anti-religious activities and divide-and-rule policies defined the period from Stalin's death in 1953

until 1985. The results of perestroika in the religious sphere under Gorbachev were a body of state-religion relations that was almost a total reversal from previous Soviet policies. It thus became possible for religious activities to increase and become more visible than they had been in the past. However, while Soviet policies had failed to extinguish religious belief and religious institutions, they still were successful at reducing visible and public religious life. Thus, practices such as religious attendance and fasting became obsolete over time even though many people continued to identify themselves as religious believers in other more intrinsic ways. While these religious practices have become more common in Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan, especially since 1991, their rates are still lower than rates of religious affiliation, trust in religious institutions and the importance of religion in one's daily life.

The first section of this article provides an overview of the religious composition of Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan. The second section presents survey data on religiosity as defined by religious practice (e.g., religious attendance, fasting and prayer) in all three countries. The third section discusses two subjective forms of religiosity: the importance of religion in one's daily life and trust in religious institutions.

This article primarily employs data from the 2008 Caucasus Barometer (CB)—a nationwide survey that is annually conducted in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC). Data on rates of prayer and the importance of religion in daily life are taken from the 2007 CB. This is not problematic because the results of questions on religion do not change drastically from year to year because such questions measure slow-moving variables. The CB uses multistage cluster sampling with preliminary stratification on nine geographically defined units in each country: capital, urban-Northeast, urban-Northwest, urban-Southeast, urban-Southwest, rural-Northeast, rural-Northwest, rural-Southeast and rural-Southwest. The sampling frame in 2007 and 2008 was the census in Azerbaijan and Georgia and electricity records

in Armenia. The number of primary sampling units (PSUs) in each stratum was proportional to the population of each stratum. Fifty households on average were randomly sampled in each PSU for an interview. The rough number of individual interviews per country was 2,082 in 2008 and 2,458 in 2007 in Armenia; 1,611 in 2008 and 3,306 in 2007 in Georgia; and 2,014 in 2008 and 2,146 in 2007 in Azerbaijan.

Religious Composition

There are many religions found in the South Caucasus region, yet there is also a general congruency between state boundaries and the religious characteristics of their populations. To understand religious affiliations in Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan the CB asks, "Which religion or denomination, if any, do you consider yourself belong to?" Eighty-five percent of people consider themselves to belong to the Orthodox Church in Georgia (10% of the population is Muslim), 95% to the Armenian Apostolic Church in Armenia, and 99% to Islam in Azerbaijan (approximately 65% of adherents are Shi'a and 35% are Sunni).

Thus, the majority of people in each country see themselves as belonging to a particular religion or denomination despite varying levels of religious practice and other forms of religiosity. This is a common feature found in many parts of the world. The following section discusses far lower percentages of people who practice different aspects of the religions to which they see themselves belonging. Certainly, there are differences in the nature of religious attendance, fasting and prayer between each of these religions. However, the purpose of this article is not to explain differences in the rates of religiosity between populations, but rather to provide an overview of the empirics and identify general patterns.

Religious Practice: Religious Attendance, Fasting and Prayer

To measure the rate of religious attendance the CB asks, "Apart from special occasions such as weddings and funerals, about how often do you attend religious services nowadays?" Responses range from 1 (every day) to 7 (never). To provide a more concise and intuitive understanding of attendance at religious services, the scale has been reversed so that higher numbers correspond to more frequent religious attendance and lower numbers correspond to less frequent religious attendance. Scores have also been collapsed into four categories: 1 (never), 2 (only on special holidays or less often), 3 (at least once a month) and 4 (once a week or more).

Figure 1 shows that religious attendance is low with less than 17% of people attending services once a week or more and 20% attending at least once a month in each

country. Over 50% of people in each country attend religious services only on special holidays or less often which attests to the symbolic nature of these religions among the populations in Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan.

The CB also asks about rates of fasting for religious purposes: "How often do you fast when it is required by your religious traditions?" Responses vary from 1 (always fast) to 5 (never fast). To provide a more concise and intuitive understanding of fasting for religious purposes, this scale has been reversed so that higher numbers correspond to more frequent fasting and lower numbers correspond to little or no fasting. As with religious attendance, scores have been collapsed into fewer categories: 1 (rarely or never fast), 2 (sometimes fast) and 3 (often or always fast).

Figure 2 shows that the majority of respondents in Armenia (91%) and Georgia (73%) rarely or never fast. Although 52% of people in Azerbaijan rarely or never fast, this country has the largest percentage of people who often or always fast (24%) among these three countries (9% in Georgia and 3% in Armenia often or always fast).

Finally, the CB from 2007 asks about rates of prayer: "Apart from religious services, how often does respondent pray?" Responses range from 1 (every day) to 7 (never). As with religious attendance, the scale has been reversed and collapsed to provide a more intuitive understanding of prayer: 1 (never), 2 (only on special holidays or less often), 3 (at least once a month) and 4 (once a week or more). Figure 3 demonstrates that in Armenia and Georgia almost as many people pray once a week or more (42% in Armenia and 49% in Georgia) as they do less often, only on special holidays or never combined (50% in Armenia and 43% in Georgia). Thus, the data presents a u-shaped curve where people either pray often or hardly at all. In contrast, only 18% of people pray once a week or more in Azerbaijan, while the majority (76%) prays only on special holidays, less often or never.

Results from Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan show that while there are generally low levels of religious practice in the region, there is also variation between countries. Azerbaijan, listed as one of the top eleven least religious countries in the world by Gallup in 2008 (as measured by how important people considered religion to be in their daily lives), has the least amount of religious practice, followed by Armenia and then Georgia with the highest level of religious participation in all three indicators.

Subjective Forms of Religiosity: Trust and Importance

In contrast to the low levels of religious practice found in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia, the populations

within these countries display high levels of religiosity with respect to trust in religious institutions and the importance of religion in one's daily life.

To measure trust in religious institutions the CB asks, "Please tell me how much you trust the religious institutions to which you belong?" Responses are located on a 5-point scale from 1 (fully distrust) to 5 (fully trust). The concept "religious institution" can have different meanings to different people in the region. It may pertain to the religious denominations and associated institutions to which Armenians, Azerbaijanis and Georgians belong (e.g., the Armenian Apostolic Church, mosques, masjids or the Georgian Orthodox Church). The concept may also be perceived as referring to religion as a whole (Georgian Orthodoxy, Islam or Armenian Apostolicism). It may also be thought of as a religious figurehead such as Patriarch Ilya II of the Georgian Orthodox Church, or important figures in the Armenian Apostolic church in Armenia or within Islam in Azerbaijan. In Azerbaijan, the concept can also refer to the Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB) which is a state-associated muftiate inherited from the Soviet era that appoints clerics to mosques and monitors sermons. The CB has refined this instrument for 2010 to include two different questions regarding trust—one with regard to trust in religious institutions and another with regard to the clergy of religious institutions.

Figure 4 shows the combined figures for "fully trust" (5) and "somewhat trust" (4) to form a joint category

of "trust". The figure shows that all three countries have trust in religious institutions: 63% in Azerbaijan, 80% in Armenia and 86% in Georgia. The fact that these countries have relatively low levels of religious practice, yet high levels of trust in religious institutions is another common feature throughout the post-Communist region. Furthermore, religious institutions are often the second most trusted institution after the military in this region (see Mishler and Rose 2001).

In addition to trust in religious institutions, the 2007 CB asks respondents to gauge the importance of religion in their daily lives. The CB asks, "To what extent do your own religious beliefs help you make decisions in daily life?" Responses range from 1 (not at all important) to 5 (very important) and the results in Figure 5 show that a majority of people in all three countries say that religion is important in their daily lives (48% in Armenia, 52% in Azerbaijan and 74% in Georgia). This is yet another indicator of one aspect of religiosity that is relatively high throughout the South Caucasus, while other aspects (religious practice) are low.

This overview of religiosity in Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan has shown that the term religiosity has a variety of meanings. On one hand, religious practices such as attendance at religious services, prayer and fasting are low. On the other, trust in religious institutions and the importance of religion in one's daily life are high in the South Caucasus.

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Recommended Reading:

- Robia Charles (2010). "Religiosity and Trust in Religious Institutions: Tales from the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia)." *Politics and Religion*, 3, pp. 228–261 doi: 10.1017/S1755048310000052.
- Caucasus Research Resource Centers. (2007 and 2008). *Caucasus Barometer*. [data set] Retrieved from <http://www.crrccenters.org/caucasusbarometer/> on September 1, 2010.
- S. Crabtree and Brett Pelham, "What Alabamians and Iranians Have in Common," *GALLUP World Poll* (February 9, 2008) (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/114211/Alabamians-Iranians-Common.aspx>, accessed on May 1 2008).
- Mishler, William and Richard Rose, "What Are the Origins of Political Trust? Testing Institutional and Cultural Theories in Post-communist Societies." *Comparative Political Studies* Vol. 34, No. 1 (February 2001): 30–62.

Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) Georgia will have a forthcoming report on religious practice in Georgia using data from the 2009 and 2007 Caucasus Barometers: "Religious Practice in Georgia" by CRRC Georgia Fellows Ketii Chubinishvili, Elene Japaridze and Jesse Tatum will be available in October 2010 at <http://www.crrccenters.org/activities/papers/>.