

Review of Religious Revival and Secularism in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan by Dobrosława Wiktor-Mach

Eva Lennartz*

Abstract

This book review considers Wiktor-Mach's Religious Revival and Secularism in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan. The author provides an excellent example of how religious revival developed in a post-Soviet country, i.e., Azerbaijan, through interviewing religious actors and individuals. She embeds her analysis in a historical perspective on Islam in Azerbaijan, which makes it clearer why there is a division between pious and ethnic Muslims and why the differences between Shia and Sunni interpretations of Islam ceased to be important. Wiktor-Mach predicts that Sunni Islam in its Turkish variant will gain strength, while Shiism is not giving up. Wiktor-Mach focuses on Baku, and thus, her work can be counted among Islamic urban studies. Further studies would be welcome which analyse the development of Islam in the regions of Azerbaijan.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, Baku, Islam, religion, revivalism

Dobrosława Wiktor-Mach'ın Sovyet Sonrası Azerbaycan'da Dini Uyanış ve Laiklik Üzerine İncelemesi

Özet

Bu kitap incelemesi, Wiktor-Mach'ın "Sovyet Sonrası Azerbaycan'da Dini Uyanış ve Laiklik" kitabını ele alıyor. Yazar, Sovyet sonrası bir ülkede, yani Azerbaycan'da dini dirilişin nasıl geliştiğine dini aktörler ve bireylerle röportajlar yaparak mükemmel bir örnek sunuyor. Analizini, dindar ve etnik Müslümanlar arasında neden bir ayırım olduğunu ve İslam'ın Şii ve Sünni yorumları arasındaki farklılıkların neden önemini yitirdiğini netleştiren, Azerbaycan'da İslam üzerine tarihsel bir perspektif içine yerleştiriyor. Wiktor-Mach, Şiilikten vazgeçilmeden Sünni İslam'ın Türk versiyonunun da güç kazanacağını tahmin ediyor. Wiktor-Mach Bakü'ye odaklanıyor ve bu nedenle çalışmaları İslami şehir çalışmaları arasında sayılabilir. Azerbaycan bölgelerinde İslam'ın gelişimini analiz eden daha fazla araştırma memnuniyetle karşılanacaktır.

* Eva Lennartz, Postgraduate Student, Eurasian Studies School of Sciences and Humanities, Nazarbayev University. E-mail: eva.lennartz@nu.edu.kz, ORCID: 0009-0006-5817-3766

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***Anahtar Kelimeler:* Azerbaycan, Bakü, İslam, din, diriliş**

Review

The Soviet Union officially promoted atheism and oppressed religion. After the end of the Soviet Union, religion started to revive and play a role in social and political life. Islamic revivalism was quickly read through a prism of extremism and perceived as dangerous (Malik, Zhussipbek et al.). In post-Soviet Azerbaijan the political elites were wary of “imported” radical Islamic ideas and therefore increases state supervision of religious communities and activities (Bedford). In contrast to other post-Soviet states in Central Asia, Azerbaijan is the most secularised Muslim country in the world (Sultanova). Current debates of religious revival revolve around the debate whether it leads to the privatisation of religion, meaning that religion becomes a private matter, or whether religion has taken on a social function in society (Malik; Bedford & Souleimanov). Considering that religion plays a decisive role in the future development of society, it is important to shed light on the choices of individuals who return to religion.

Dobrosława Wiktor-Mach is a Polish researcher who focuses on urban development, heritage, and the sociology of religion (Islam). In the fall semester of 2009, she was Visiting Professor in the Department of Eastern Languages and Religious Studies at Khazar University in Baku. The data she collected during that time period became part of her dissertation entitled “Competing Islamic Traditions: An Anthropological Perspective” (Wiktor-Mach, 42). Wiktor-Mach interviewed forty-two Muslims as well as religious leaders (for example from mosques, educational institutions or faith-based organisations) and experts from academia and media on the religious situation in Azerbaijan (44). In addition, she conducted two focus groups with religious communities. Her contacts were established through people related to religion or through visiting mosques herself.

In the reviewed book Wiktor-Mach analyses religious revivalism, that is the revival of Islamic values, traditions, institutions and identity, in Azerbaijan after the end of the Soviet Union. Religious revivalism has been studied by other scholars. Asad is well-known for his idea of studying Islam as an evolving discursive tradition. Mahmood and Hirschkind, for example, showed how ordinary pious Muslims integrate Islamic rituals in their daily lives. Both argue that secularism

is complex and impacts on the religious traditions in a different way – “secularism never escapes its own religious histories” (UC Berkeley). Schielke investigated the daily practices of “ordinary Muslims” in an Egyptian village during Ramadan.

Wiktor-Mach joins the ranks of scholars who have studied religious revivalism, focusing on Azerbaijan. She argues that liberal religious policies in the 1990s in post-Soviet Azerbaijan provided room for foreign and local religious leaders to promote their ideas. She seeks to understand the competition between those leaders and the choices made by individuals. In doing so, she perceives of Baku as an economic marketplace, in which different Shia and Sunni Muslim movements propose faith options to follow. Among the Sunni Islamic options, she identifies Salafism, Turkish Islam and an Islam proposed by reform-oriented intellectuals. She finds that there is a growing trend towards religiosity, despite governmental restrictions and interference. She explains religious revival by the diversity of options proposed by religious traditions belonging to Islam and the fact that some religious groups included references to modern science in their discourses (140-141).

In her work, Wiktor-Mach provides an excellent overview of the contemporary Islamic religious options available to the people in Azerbaijan. Through studying religious revival in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, she makes a strong case that Islam is not a monolith, but more nuanced. This is line with Mahmood and Hirschkind’s understanding that secularism – Azerbaijan is one of the most secular Muslim countries in the world - is complex and impacts on religious traditions in a different way. With her study Wiktor-Mach also seeks to counter stereotypes surrounding Islam. She adds to scholarship on the anthropology of Islam in Azerbaijan, which is scarce. In her view, the current religious revival in Azerbaijan will “determine the future of Islam in the region” (111). She finds that depending on the result of the current competition between religious discursive traditions, Azerbaijan may be either a Sunni or Shia majority country in the future: On the one hand, she notes that Sunni Islam and its Turkish variant attract new followers. However, the Azerbaijani regime seeks to limit Turkish influence, considering, for example, that the Caucasus University described by Wiktor-Mach, which is supported by the

Turkish *fethullahçı*¹ movement, was closed in 2017 and renamed Baku Engineering University. On the other hand, she finds that Shiism “in its various interpretations, not necessarily pro-Iranian”, is not giving up (ibid.). However, the influence of Iran might not be that limited, considering that at funerals of soldiers subsequent to recent border clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan in September 2022, a group of people chanted the religious slogans: “Şah Hüseyn, vah Hüseyn”², and concerns were raised that these people are not true believers, but carrying out propaganda for Iran (Mirayiq).

In Azerbaijan there are a variety of religious discourses and their interaction is complex (Kotecha). Religiousness means different things in different settings, for example in private as compared to public, and functions in society on different levels, such as nationalism, tradition and morality. It also is a social-identity glue (Kotecha 3). Wiktor-Mach’s work helps to shed light on these religious identity issues and how they came into being. In order to do so, she necessarily starts off her analysis with an overview of the historical development of religion in Azerbaijan. She distinguishes five periods, which were significant for the religious history of Azerbaijan: The introduction of Islam under the Arabs in the 7th century, the influx of Turkic and Mongol tribes who brought with them their own models of Islamic practice, the establishment of Shiism as an official religion of the Safavid Empire in 1501; the spread of secular ideas under Tsarist Russia, and the Soviet period under communism. Her historical analysis is concise, yet detailed.³

Wiktor-Mach was intrigued by the paradox that Azerbaijanis eagerly evoke a tradition of religious and cultural coexistence and tolerance. This perception is also called into question by Grant who finds that there is a “long record of fraught cohabitations for which many Caucasus societies have long been known” (126). Wiktor-Mach

¹ Refers to adherents of Fetullah Gülen.

² Translated as “Shah Husayn, poor Husayn” – Husayn is considered to be the third Imam of Shia Islam and perceived as a martyr due to his suffering and death in the Battle of Karbala.

³ However, for a reader learning for the first time about the development of religion in Azerbaijan Wiktor-Mach’s analysis might seem complex. For a more comprehensive description of Islam in Azerbaijan see Yunusov. For a short, but less complex explanation see Cornell.

reveals that the coexistence between Shias and Sunnis was not always peaceful: For example, the Seljuk Turks, Sunni Muslims, “ruthlessly struggled with all manifestations of Shiism” and then under Safavid rule non-Shia groups were cruelly eliminated (56, 66).

In her historical analysis, Wiktor-Mach finds the roots for the current division in Islamic revival between “ethnic” and “pious” Muslims – the former referring to those who practise religion occasionally with some beliefs in God, whereas the latter refers to those Muslims with complete faith in the divine revelations. These parallel traditions were reinforced during the Soviet period, argues Wiktor-Mach (37). Furthermore, during the communist period, Sunni and Shia differences ceased to be important; and religion became privatised (Tohidi). Wiktor-Mach points out that this has resulted in the fact that many young Muslims in Azerbaijan cannot differentiate whether they are Shia or Sunni (107). In this respect, the book is also relevant for young Azerbaijanis who want to understand more about their religious identity. Interestingly, Wiktor-Mach finds that some Islamic rituals were merged with communism during Soviet times, for instance, the *namaz*⁴ was promoted as a way of ensuring a healthy life and treated as a sport activity (79).

Wiktor-Mach conducted her fieldwork in 2009 and the book was published in 2017. Since then, more than ten years have passed. In my personal opinion, people in Baku have not become more religious. For people from poorer families and from the villages surrounding Baku religion might be attractive, however, the practice of religion is perforce limited by the market: It will be more difficult for pious Muslims to find a job which allows them to perform the *namaz*, for instance. Furthermore, I disagree that Baku is “a battlefield for the minds and souls of ‘ethnic Muslims’” (Book description). Rather, I think that it is crucial to take developments in the regions of Azerbaijan into account. Especially in the South of Azerbaijan the influences of Iran are stronger. I find it worrisome that recently parents in Zaqatala in North-Western Azerbaijan do not see a necessity to send their children to school. Azerbaijan’s geography and historical development have led to regional variation in religiousness: Religiousness varies across Azerbaijan and Baku (Kotecha). Wiktor-Mach only looks at Baku in her

⁴ Muslim daily prayer.

analysis of religious revival. However, her analysis provides a starting point to explore the anthropology of Islam in the Azerbaijani regions. She also puts her research into the larger picture, drawing references to developments in Central Asia, and Muslim communities in the Pankisi valley in Georgia and in Poland.

In the book under review, Wiktor-Mach describes how young people in Azerbaijan turn to religion. Although I agree that young people do so especially in periods of their lives in which they are confronted with uncertainty, I diverge from the author's opinion that young people actively compare the different Islamic faith options available to them. In my view, this rather has to do with proximity and the influence of their peer group or personal relations. For instance, a young woman from Zaqatala grew up in a family in which women did not wear the veil. However, now after she got married, she wears the veil since her husband, who comes from a more conservative family, requires it from her. Young students might temporarily turn to religion, but later they might find incongruencies in what is preached in the mosque and turn away from religion. However, I do agree that young people have to "prove their choice at every step" (Wiktor-Mach, 87). Interestingly, some young converts⁵ do not fully adhere to the religious obligations, for instance, Wiktor-Mach writes that Hafiza, a young student with whom the author shared an apartment in Baku, does not find the hijab⁶ fashionable, instead Hafiza expects that she will lead a more religious life when she will be over 40 years old (155). This resonates with other scholarship on the complexities of Muslims' religiosity in everyday life.⁷

In sum, Wiktor-Mach provides an excellent example of how religious revival developed in a post-Soviet country, i.e., Azerbaijan, through interviewing religious actors and individuals. She embeds her analysis in a historical perspective on Islam in Azerbaijan, which makes

⁵ The term "converts" is questionable since it is rather a return or re-assertion of religion.

⁶ Islamic head covering.

⁷ See for example Debevec, Liza. Women and Islam in Urban Burkina Faso: Piety between Definitions and Interpretation. *Development, Modernism and Modernity in Africa*, edited by Augustine Agwuele, Routledge, 2012, pp. 230-241.

it clearer why there is a division between pious and ethnic Muslims and why the differences between Shia and Sunni interpretations of Islam ceased to be important. Wiktor-Mach predicts that Sunni Islam in its Turkish variant will gain strength, while Shiism is not giving up. It would be interesting to see in practice what the state of religious revival in Azerbaijan is today. I personally know a young woman who used to wear the *hijab*, but recently took it off. Does this perhaps mean that the religious factor is losing strength? In her study, Wiktor-Mach focuses on Baku, and thus, her work can be counted among Islamic urban studies. Further studies would be welcome which analyse the development of Islam in the regions of Azerbaijan.

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