

NORTH OSSETIA-ALANIA: RELIGION IN THE AXIOLOGICAL STRUCTURE OF ITS POPULATION

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ABSTRACT

In the last few decades, society in the Russian Federation has been exposed to globalization apparent in all spheres of social life ranging from the economy to worldviews. The globalization processes led to the revival of religion and the consolidation of its positions. The role of religion in the life of the peoples living in Russia varies. The Russian Federation is a state with a diverse ethnic composition, different geographical, climatic conditions and history, a state structured around various religious denominations.

In the 1990s, the religious policy in Russia was fairly ambiguous and vague, to say the least. This was the time when religious institutions acquired new social roles that moved religion to the fore. It regained its lost positions, the statuses of the previously discriminated religious organizations were restored, while previously unheard-of religious movements spread far and wide across the country.

The growing number of religious institutions, their greater role in everyday life of different peoples, the ever increasing authority of their leaders and the emergence of new, non-traditional organizations have created an absolutely new spiritual environment. These processes differ between regions, which means that the state should

establish a well-balanced religious policy by taking local specifics into account, among other things.

Religion and religious ideologies are realized on the basis of the altered functions and statuses of religions and the behavior of the followers of different religious organizations.

The steadily growing impact of religion in the Northern Caucasus demands closer attention to the transformations of religious beliefs in the context of the social and political statuses of the North Caucasian republics in the Russian Federation.

This article is based on the materials of the large-scale polls of the population of the republics of the North-Caucasian Federal District of the Russian Federation: North-Ossetia-Alania, Chechnia, Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Ingushetia, Daghestan and Kabardino-Balkaria carried out in the summer of 2016 by the North-Ossetian Department of Social Studies of the Institute of Socio-Political Research, Russian Academy of Sciences, and the Department of Sociology of the Khetagurov North-Ossetian University which involved 1,200 respondents, including 50 experts (journalists, academics, bureaucrats, members of political parties, people working in the sphere of culture, followers of different religions and legal professionals).

KEYWORDS: *radicalization of Islam, religiosity, confession, religious attitudes, religious modernity, stability, sociocultural milieu, transformation, extremism, ethno-nationalism, ethnic religions, values, traditional religions.*

Introduction

The institution of religion remains an inalienable part of human life despite the fact that over the course of centuries many social institutions such as marriages, birthdays and certain holydays lost their initial religious meanings.

The latest studies have demonstrated that a quarter of the total population of Russia should be regarded as genuinely religious. About 80% of Russians are Orthodox Christians, while church attendance is limited to about 20% of that number. Religiosity is much higher among the non-Orthodox peoples, where consolidation is one of its most important functions of religion.

Muslims of the Northern Caucasus speak of themselves as absolutely religious people: they identify religion with morals and other social regulators; religious dogmas are observed like laws; the steadily increasing impact of the religious factor on the ethnopolitical and social processes is capable of stirring up social conflicts.

They can be ignited by political and economic contradictions that create extremists. Those who refuse to accept the authorities' political decisions turn to radical Islam as an instrument of opposition. Adherents of terrorist organizations (i.e., Imarat Kavkaz, liquidated by the end of 2017) are pursuing their own aim: an independent Islamic state in the Northern Caucasus with international contacts in the globalized world. The steadily growing impact of religion on social life in the North Caucasian republics of the Russian Federation increases the opposition between the insurgents and the authorities.

The growth of religious self-awareness, religious identity and self-perception not as an ethnic group but as part of the great Muslim civilization is highly typical of the "Islamic" republics of Russia.¹ Mosques are built, Islamic customs and rites are restored, Muslim education is receiving increasingly more attention. We can even say that we are observing the politicization and radicalization of Islam.

The religious context of this sort inevitably attracts attention of the academic community of the Northern Caucasus. This explains why in 2016 the North Ossetian Center for Sociological Studies organized and carried out an ethnocultural study of the Religious Situation in the Republics of the Northern Caucasus, in which I took part. This paper presents the results obtained in the Republic North Ossetia-Alania.

The Degree of Religiosity

The republic stands apart from its North Caucasian neighbors where its religious image is concerned. On the one hand, we should take its multiethnic nature into account, with members of different ethnicities belonging to different confessions. On the other hand, the titular ethnicity is not ethnically homogenous. Normally, Ossetians are defined as Christians, which is not entirely true. Christi-

¹ See: M.M. Mchedlova, Yu.A. Gavrillov, A.G. Shevchenko, E.N. Kafanova, "Rol religioznogo faktora v sotsialnoy adaptatsii v Rossii," *Rossia reformiruiushchaisia*, Annual issue, 2016, pp. 468-493.

anity came to the Northern Caucasus in the 6th century when the first Zikhia See was set up; several decades later the Alan See was set up on Kuban.² The absolute majority of Ossetians, who are descendants of the Alans, profess Christianity. A considerable part of them (about 15%) are Muslims; until the revolution of 1917 their share was much greater—up to 40%. Islam had reached this area in the Middle Ages, yet the culture and features of ancient faiths were and remain among the prominent factors of religiosity of the local population. Today, traditional religion plays an important role among the Ossetians: a third of the nation considers themselves followers of Styr XwytSau (The Great God) and prays to it in sacred groves.

The set of religious ideas is highly important as a component part of the structure of the ideas about the world. Materials of sociological studies have revealed which of the values (work, career, the family, friends and acquaintances, leisure, politics) are more important than religion for the citizens of the republic (see Table 1). Religion as a social phenomenon will be discussed here through the lens of empirical material.

Table 1

Everyday Life Values of the Population of North Ossetia-Alania

	Work, Career	Family	Friends and Acquaintances	Leisure	Politics	Religion
Not important at all	0.0	0.8	1.6	1.6	14.8	10.6
Not very important	5.5	0.8	8.7	25.4	48.4	26.8
Fairly important	36.2	3.9	55.1	53.2	30.5	43.3
Very important	58.3	94.5	34.6	19.8	6.3	19.5
Undecided	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

In a world that has economy at its core, career is believed to be one of the fundamental values. At the threshold of adult live all and everyone has to select his/her priorities: the choice is between family and self-realization/career. For the majority of the republic’s population (58.3%) career is a very important life value; 36.2% agree that work is fairly important; and merely 5.5% dismiss it as unimportant.

The family, however, is more important than career for the absolute majority of the polled: 94.5% said that their families are the most important factor of their lives; 3.9% described them as fairly important; and a meager 0.8% believe that the family was not important or not very important.

Over half of the North Ossetia population spoke of friends and acquaintances as a fairly important component of their lives; 34.6% believed that friends were very important; for 8.7% they were not important, while 1.6% described friends as unimportant. The large share of those who cherish their friends and acquaintances means that the ties between people or even families are very important for those who live in North Ossetia-Alania.

Leisure is very important for 19.8% of the total population; the majority (53.2%) said that it was fairly important, while a quarter of the polled (25.4%) were indifferent; 1.6% said that leisure was not important at all.³

² See: Z.N. Vanceev, “Rodovoy stroy v Osetii,” *IYuONII*, Tskhinvali, No. 5, 1946.

³ See: Kh.V. Dzutsev, “Prichiny mezhnatsionalnoy napriazhennosti i ekstremizma v respublikakh Severo-Kavkazskogo federalnogo okruga Rossii,” *Gumanitarniy Yuga Rossii*, No. 2, 2014, pp. 94-106.

A third of the republic's population said that politics was fairly important for them. Only 6.3% described it as a very important component of their lives. Half of the polled (48.4%) dismissed politics as not very important, while 14.8%, as not important at all.

In North Ossetia-Alania only 19.5% spoke of religion as very important; 43.3%, as fairly important; a quarter of the total (26.8%) as not very important. One out of ten of residents of North Ossetia (10.6%) feel comfortable without religion. According to the sociological study in the North Caucasian Federal District, religion is very important for the absolute majority in Chechnya (83.3%) and Ingushetia (82.3%). In other republics the shares of those who speak of religion as very important are slightly smaller—63.6% in Karachaevo-Cherkessia, 43.7% in Kabardino-Balkaria, 41.9% in Dagestan.

Sociologists are convinced that religion will serve as an instrument of a system of tolerant coexistence of different ethnicities.⁴ This generally coincides with sociological results: 70.8% of the expert community believe that the family (clan) was and will remain the most important value for all Caucasian peoples. The family is less important for the young people (especially in cities). It is much more important in the countryside where the family is connected with land and house issues. In cities, sexual life does not require a person to be married. One of the experts refers to the family as a “shelter.”

Only a quarter of the experts believe that career is an absolute priority, by which they mean work as a source of means of subsistence, not as a calling. It is a second important value for 45.8% of respondents. Experts have pointed out that it is not that easy to find a job, jobs are few and far between. Work has become a priority, but not a method of self-realization. Young people who prefer the Western lifestyle move to big cities in Russia or emigrate.

Friends and acquaintances occupy the third place among the priorities in the North Caucasian republics; men and urban youth point to them as most important source of indispensable information and support.

A number of experts (20.8%) put religion in the third place; the same share of the polled put it on the fourth place; 16.7% of the expert community (mainly in Chechnya and Ingushetia) put it in the second place. Only 8.3% of the polled experts in Ingushetia and Dagestan moved it to the first place and specified that it was most important “for deeply religious people.” The majority of the expert community believes that the North Caucasian population is generally not very religious.

The experts pointed to the low level of political awareness in the Northern Caucasus: 29.1% of the polled put politics on the fourth place; a quarter of experts pushed it down to the fifth. According to the large-scale survey, population of Dagestan was more politicized than that of other republics. One out of four respondents stated that politics played an important role in his/her life. Most of the respondents in other republics answered this question negatively.

16.7% of experts are convinced that leisure comes in the fifth place in the life of local people; one out of five experts (20.8%), puts it on the sixth place. According to the majority, it does not play an important role in the life of the North Caucasian population. They are not accustomed to leisure and use their free time to earn money on the side, for home repairs and visits to relatives. None of the experts mentioned leisure as a time to improve qualification or engage in a hobby. One of them put it in a nutshell: “Success at work and a happy family adequately compensate for the lack of leisure time.”

The respondents and the absolute majority of experts agree that religion is very important, but not exceptionally important, in the axiological structure of the North-Ossetian society.⁵ One-fifth of the experts spoke about the predominant interest in religion, while others believed that it came third

⁴ See: Kh.V. Dzutsev, *Etnosotsiologichesky portret respublik Severo-Kavkazskogo federalnogo okruga Rossiyskoy Federatsii*, ROSSPEN, Moscow, 2012, p. 357.

⁵ See: V.A. Tishkov, *Etnichnost i religia v sovremennykh konfliktakh*, The Miklukho-Maklai Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, RAS, Nauka Publishers, Moscow, 2012, 651 pp.

or even fourth on the scale of interests of the local people. It also followed from the answers of the inhabitants of North Ossetia that religion was even less important for them than for Russian and Russian-speaking respondents.

When asked about the place of religion on their value scales, neither the younger or the older generation in the other republics of the Northern Caucasus spoke of it as a priority. Our respondents were much more concerned about the problem of employment among the younger generation, crime, their own material welfare and interpersonal relations, that is, about social and economic problems. The positive answers to the questions about religion and the relationships with the closest circle confirmed that the communal form of life predominated in everyday life and in the minds of North Caucasian highlanders.

Positive answers to the question about religion and its importance were rare among the respondents of North Ossetia. In fact, it turned out that the level of religiosity among the polled in Dagestan and Kabardino-Balkaria was much lower than among the population of Chechnia, Ingushetia and Karachaevo-Cherkessia.

Due to psychological, historical, geographic and ethnic factors religion has been occupying the same positions in people's minds for many years. In fact, religion appeared and survived due to the spiritual requirements of people who needed consolation, who wanted to feel protected in the face of cruel reality and sought harmonious development and peace of mind. Religion creates a certain comprehensive and objective understanding and description of the way of human existence in this world. It is closely connected with the absolute nature of the concepts of human existence. Religion existed in the past, exists today and will exist in the future as a special idea about life, an individual perception of the world and an answer to the question about the meaning of life.

Ethnicity is another factor behind the long history of religion. A people (ethnicity) is the bearer of traditions through history, while religion is, in fact, one of the traditions. It keeps smaller peoples together, which explains why the faith of the Muslim peoples is closely connected with folk traditions.⁶ In Muslim families, religiosity is transferred from one generation to another along with customs, ideas about the world and rules of conduct. Religiosity consolidates its positions amid ethnic conflicts and social upheavals, which adds special importance to ethnic cohesion.⁷

Conclusion

The family in the sense of a clan was and remains the main value for the Caucasian peoples. According to the data obtained so far it is an absolute priority.

Work, which is direly needed to support a family, comes second on the scale of values.

The third place on the same scale is shared by "friends and acquaintances" and "religion". Half of those polled in the Northern Caucasus spoke of friendship and good relations as extremely important. Men and young people said that friends and acquaintances meant a lot in their lives; in view of the highly special mentality of the Caucasian mountaineers, the opinions of blood relatives, relatives-in-law and neighbors become particularly significant.

According to 20.8% of the experts, religion occupies the third place, while the same share of the polled believe that it comes fourth; 16.7% of the expert community regarded it as the second priority.

⁶ See: M.M. Mchedlova, "Religia, obshchestvo, gosudarstvo: vyzovy i ugrozy sovremennosti," *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia*, No. 10, 2016, pp. 110-118.

⁷ See: Kh.V. Dzutsev, "Prichiny mezhnatsionalnoy napriazhennosti i ekstremizma v respublikakh Severo-Kavkazskogo federalnogo okruga Rossii."

The mechanism of religious attitudes is the part of human personality responsible for the ideas about the world. In fact, the ideas and doctrines that emerged as religious teachings gradually blend with culture to develop as products of group (people's) or individual culture and set axiological landmarks. An individual might be unaware that they are rooted in religion. This means that religious ideas about the world will survive as part of culture as long as mankind survives.

Despite the steadily growing number of atheists, it can be stated with a great degree of certainty that religion will not disappear for a great number of reasons. There are psychological reasons (consolation), social (religion keeps people together), historical, cultural and everyday factors. Whatever religion relies on — fear or love — its positions in human minds are firm.
