

# Encountering Informal and Invisible Religious Diversity in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan\*

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## Abstract

This paper explores religious place-making as part of informal religious pluralization in autocratic Azerbaijan and examines how restrictive top-down state regulations may affect less institutionalized faith communities. It does so by focusing on the process of negotiation and a set of religious practices aimed at the symbolic and material appropriation of urban spaces. How do less institutionalized ‘practitioners’ and urban religious leaders respond to the shrinking space for religious freedom, and how are faith practices mediated in concrete spaces? To answer these questions, I provide two empirical examples of religious place-making in Baku, a vernacular Shia sacred site on the one hand, and the Bahai community, a non-Muslim religious minority, on the other. Without suggesting that these examples exhaustively capture the dynamics around religious pluralization, I draw attention to the interplay between the ideological power of state interventions and informal and creative religious place-making in the city. The contribution identifies the restrained visibility of folk shrines and the invisibility of Bahai practitioners that become part of an urban social reality and mundane use of urban and residential spaces. By sharing space with non-religious actors, religious practitioners use a variety of urban spaces on a temporary basis.

**Keywords:** religious place-making, post-Soviet Azerbaijan, shrinking religious freedom, minorities, folk shrines, Bahai community, Baku

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the discussion on the limits of and possibilities for religious plurality and religious place-making in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. Since gaining independence in 1991, Azerbaijan has seen a resurgence in religion, with a growing number and

diversity of houses of worship and sacred sites. More recently, however, there has been a radical shift in state-faith relations from an initial liberal, welcoming policy to restrictive measures and increased state control over religious practices in public spaces. In particular, in the 2010s, the Azerbaijani state authorities imposed a set of strict regulations on religious freedom.

This paper draws attention to informal religious place-making as part of religious pluralization in Azerbaijan and examines how top-down state regulations may affect less institutionalized faith communities in the city of Baku. By place-making, I mean a process of negotiation and a set of religious practices aimed at the symbolic and material appropriation of urban spaces through

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which a religious community finds its own niche in the fabric of urban life. Thus, my use of the term 'place-making' in this paper includes crucial understandings of religious place-making elaborated in Western European urban contexts (Vasquez and Knott 2014, Becci et al. 2016), but it goes beyond what is mainly associated with keeping or seeking a place in already religiously marked terrains. This paper seeks to provide a more nuanced picture for understanding the specific limits and potential of religious plurality in post-Soviet autocratic Azerbaijan.

Religious diversity in Azerbaijan has not only found expression in a multiplicity of faiths and a growing number of religious actors; it has also taken on a new dimension in the ways practitioners create a variety of worship sites in the city.

While Azerbaijan is usually associated with Islam, it is also home to a variety of non-Muslim groups. The number of houses of worship for Muslims and Christians in the country grew from thirty in 1989 to 2,500 in 2018. According to the State Committee for Working with Religious Organizations (SCWRO), 136 mosques, eleven churches, three synagogues, two Bahai centres and one Krishna community centre were registered in the capital city of Baku (population 2.3 million) in 2017. Nationally there are approximately 2,250 mosques, thirty churches, seven synagogues and three Bahai centres. At the same time, one should not underestimate the existence of more than 748 popular Islamic saint and pilgrimage sites (*pir* and *ziyarat-gah*) associated with traditional saint veneration.

According to our observations, the current religious plurality in Azerbaijan does not reflect a return to pre-Soviet religious constellations with relatively rigid boundaries between institutionalized Shia Islam, Russian Orthodox Christianity, the Armenian Apostolic Church and Jewish communities. Rather, there is a new constellation of large and small, newly arrived and old faiths, which underwent a significant change during the Soviet period. All religious organizations, their activities and leaders are now subject to regulations shaped by Soviet-style secularism,

current socio-political regimes and transnational forces.

While preserving secularism as a set of institutional arrangements for separating politics from religion, the Azerbaijani state does not deny its Islamic heritage. According to official statistics, Shias constituted 60 to 65 per cent of the total Muslim population in 2018 and Sunnis 35 to 40 per cent. The number of Sunni Muslims in Azerbaijan is also increasing (Balci and Goyushov 2012). Due to external influences from Turkey, Iran and Russia, Azerbaijan is witnessing a growing variety of Muslim practices and schools that are constantly challenging the secular power and administrative authorities (Jödicke 2017; Goyushov 2019). To manage this internal Muslim diversity and counter the opposition to it from Shia Islam, the state has elaborated a variety of strategies, including the idea of promoting a national 'proper' Islam. This innovative ideology has found expression, for instance, in the construction of the spectacular new Heydar mega-mosque in Baku. Built in 2016 as a prayer hall for simultaneous use by both Sunni and Shia Muslims, the mega-mosque stands for a 'good' and 'united' Islam in Azerbaijan.

Another local Islamic tradition that is often overlooked by scholars in contemporary urban and religious diversity studies is related to an informal and vernacular form of Islam in Azerbaijan: popular folk beliefs in saints and the healing power of sacred, usually rural sites known as *pir* and *ziyarat gah*. Religious beliefs and practices around these sites can be classified as a 'little tradition' of Islam in opposition to the 'great tradition' of texts and official doctrine (Redfield 1955, Grant 2011, Darieva 2018). They are, however, by no means insignificant for urban society: visits to *pir* shrines and *ziyarat gah* are an important part of the everyday life of Azerbaijanis. Unlike the scriptural Islam practised in the mosques, shrines and sacred sites are 'independent' from the institutionalized religious infrastructure and clergy. Until recently they were managed and maintained by ordinary individuals and informal caretakers, in many cases by women.



Figure 1. State sponsored Heydar Mosque in Baku, built in 2017. 2019, Source: Tsypylma Darieva

The aim of this paper is to analyse how grassroots practitioners create their own places and appropriate urban spaces in view of the changes to urban materialities and the increasing pressure from the administrative authorities. How do less institutionalized ‘practitioners’ and urban religious leaders respond to the shrinking space for religious freedom, and how are faith practices mediated in concrete spaces? To answer these questions, I will turn to Baku, the capital city of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and provide insights into two examples of religious place-making, a vernacular Shia sacred site in central Baku on the one hand, and the Bahai community, a non-Muslim religious minority, on the other. Without suggesting that these examples exhaustively capture the dynamics around religious pluralization and urban religious place-making, I draw attention to the interplay between the ideological power of state interventions and informal and creative religious place-making in the city. Post-Soviet Baku functions today as a ‘laboratory’ of social change

in which a variety of religious movements and a strong state secularism exist side by side, generating modern configurations that co-produce urban religious spaces and multiple moralities.

What follows is an overview of recent state interventions and administrative regulations for religious life and its governance in Azerbaijan. I then move to my empirical material in Baku, highlighting informal and temporary forms of appropriating urban spaces. The analysis is based on my ethnographic observations, interviews and informal conversations at selected religious sites in the city, which I carried out during my fieldwork in Baku in 2015, 2018 and 2019. Thirty qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with a variety of religious leaders at different religious sites and urban experts who are involved in managing the religious sphere in Azerbaijan.

#### **Governing the religious in post-Soviet Azerbaijan**

While some studies refer to increasing religious pluralization in post-Soviet societies (Pelkmans

2017; Alisauskiene and Schröder 2016; Wanner 2007), the question of how religious pluralization unfolds in urban contexts in the post-Soviet southern Caucasus has been largely overlooked. When analysing the post-Soviet return of religion to public spaces in the Caucasus, we should not disregard the fact that religious matters were not entirely suppressed in the Soviet period and that they have been significantly changed (Dragadze 1993). There were, in fact, particular ideals and tools for preserving religion as a state-sponsored 'tradition' based on the Soviet-style infrastructure of regulating relations between faith and the state. In this context, anthropologists have identified the centrality of the notion of religious belonging, not beliefs as such, as they have lost their original meaning in post-Soviet societies (Smolkin 2018). The notion of belonging still affects the way religion and its expression are perceived and practiced in the post-Soviet world (Luehrmann 2012; Wanner 2015; McBrien 2017). By highlighting the urban Azerbaijani context in Baku, I draw attention to the secularized example in the Islamic world, where religious belonging generally coincides with ethnic and language affiliations, and where there is no fixed normative religious system and knowledge that regulates people's everyday lives. In the view of Azerbaijani secular elites, as the majority religion, Islam should be preserved as a cultural feature and as part of the country's national heritage, rather than being used a social and political resource. As one of the ideologues of the post-Soviet policy towards Islam emphasized in his interview, 'Faith is a matter of individual choice that should be practised in private rooms.'<sup>1</sup>

Over the last twenty years, there has been a significant transformation of religious policy. Two periods of Azerbaijani state policies on religion can be discerned. The 1990s were a period of relative freedom in religious activities, in particular during and after the Karabakh war (1988-1994),

<sup>1</sup> Interview with Rafik Aliyev, a former ideologue of the State Committee for Working with Religious Organizations, conducted by the author in Baku, March 2019.

when the Azerbaijani government welcomed many Christian missionaries and Islamic charitable organizations. The 2000s and 2010s, conversely, saw the re-introduction of a centralized policy of controlling religious groups and their expressions in public spaces. This process has been influenced by political and social factors that are driving the state to respond more rigorously to perceived external threats and oppositional religious activism, while also attempting to improve Azerbaijan's modern image on the international stage.

The state authorities are therefore heavily engaged in defining the boundaries of the religious domain, which is seen as a matter of surveillance and control. All religious groups have to be registered; even local folk shrines are increasingly subject to control by state-sponsored clergy and the local administration. Azerbaijan does not explicitly privilege Islam in political narratives. Even Shia Islam, which was historically the de facto state religion and numerically the dominant faith in the country, has no special status in the modern constitution. Azerbaijan represents a specific secular constellation due to its early process of secularization that began at the end of the nineteenth century,<sup>2</sup> the radical secularization of the harsh Soviet anti-religious campaigns, industrialization and contemporary Azerbaijani national secularism. It is therefore not surprising that we observe an official discourse about a relatively low level of religiosity in Azerbaijan after socialism and a policy of suppressing new global Muslim faith communities (Bedford 2009; Balci and Goyushov 2015; Wiktor-Mach 2017). Azerbaijan is therefore striving to preserve its secular heritage, often in the name of fighting religious extremism.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> On the anti-clerical movement at the end of the 19th century and the role of the Mulla Nasreddin journal, see Grant 2016.

<sup>3</sup> In this sense, contemporary Azerbaijani policy is comparable with the repressive policy in Tajikistan, which is justified with reference to countering extremism and entails not only banning laws but also official efforts to create a 'proper' Islam for its national population (Lemon and Thibault 2018).

The centralized nature of regulations is very much linked to Soviet legacies shaping religious state policy, management style and language. The crucial institution for regulating Muslim religious life in Azerbaijan is the state-sponsored Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB), which was known until the mid-1990s as the Spiritual Board of Transcaucasian Muslims.<sup>4</sup> The post-Soviet continuity of this institution in Azerbaijan is obvious: for example, the leader of the CMB has held this position since 1987. Together with the State Committee for Working with Religious Organizations (2001), the CMB is responsible for controlling, monitoring and representing Muslim issues within and outside of the country.

The transformation of religious policy has been formalized in legal amendments that foster a hierarchy among so-called 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' religious organizations. This approach has led to the unequal treatment of different religious communities and created a distinction between 'good' and 'bad' religions. In this regard, different religious communities and sacred sites have different relations with the state authorities in terms of visibility, legitimacy, the built environment and access to public structures. Traditional religious groups include local Shia and Sunni Muslim communities, the Russian Orthodox Church and Judaism. Officials in Baku use the term 'non-traditional' to identify a set of institutionalized confessions with transnational linkages and 'foreign' backgrounds. Among the communities considered by the state authorities to be non-traditional are a number of Evangelical and Charismatic Protestant Churches, including the Seventh-day Adventists and the Baptist Union, Krishnaism, new Muslim communities established after 1991, such as the Salafis and the Nurcu movement, and other minorities, including historical communities such as the Bahai faith.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the Azerbaijani authorities use the

terms 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' in a political way that allows them to regard certain religious communities as potential challenges and to intervene in their practices by applying bureaucratic terminology like 'licensed' and 'unlicensed' to them.

Three main strategies can be identified in faith-state relationships in Azerbaijan. The first is restrictive control over faiths and their presence in public spaces, in particular in the case of Jehovah's Witnesses, new Muslim communities and oppositional Shia communities in rural areas. The Azerbaijani government views them as a threat to national security, as they are often thought to be under the influence of foreign powers, such as Iran and other Gulf states. As an imam at one mosque frequented by Salafis emphasized, religious issues are subordinated to urban traffic rules:

When I was driving to morning prayer, a traffic policeman stopped me and told me that I had broken the rules. He said that I was driving fast. I asked him to issue a fine, as I was in a hurry. He asked where I was hurrying to. I said that I was hurrying to pray and needed to arrive in time. He asked why it was so important to be on time. You can pray later. I cannot explain to people that if I do not come to the mosque on time, no one will be able to come and pray. So there is such a rule. Just think, the number of people participating in the morning prayer is about 600, but I cannot keep them waiting...

The second strategy involves selected restrictions on 'non-traditional faiths' such as Evangelical Churches, Krishnaism and the local Bahai faith. In 2014, an amendment to Azerbaijan's constitution prohibited the dissemination of religious literature and financial support from abroad, which affected the issue of the registration of non-traditional religious organizations by the State Committee for Working with Religious Organizations. For many non-traditional religious communities, it became difficult to obtain registration. Registration is the state's way not only of endorsing the existence of a religious community and its 'purity' in the eyes of the authorities, but also of legitimizing the community's presence

<sup>4</sup> The Spiritual Board of Transcaucasian Muslims was established in 1872 by the Russian tsarist administration and relaunched in 1943 during WWII.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Agil Shirinov, vice rector of the Azerbaijan Institute for Theology, conducted in Baku in February 2019.

and visibility in physical space. The third strategy is strategic co-optation of those faith groups that can be useful for Azerbaijan's international relations, in particular Judaism, the Russian Orthodox Church and Catholicism. To advance its national and international politics, the Azerbaijani state uses these specific religious communities as additional soft power to promote good relations with regional and international partners such as Russia, Europe, Israel and the United States. For instance, as a result of the ban on foreign missionaries introduced in the 2010s, all religious leaders must be citizens of Azerbaijan. However, the Catholic and Lutheran Churches seem to be exceptions to this rule, as they have special agreements with the State Committee for Working with Religious Organizations and are allowed to invite foreign pastors from countries such as Germany and Slovakia.<sup>6</sup>

Azerbaijan amended its law on religious freedom significantly in 2015 and 2017. Strict re-registration requirements and bureaucratic procedures have become important instruments of state control over local and transnational Muslim religious groups (Bashirov 2018). In this way, access to Sunni and Shia mosques and the call to prayer (*azan*) has been limited during Ramadan in Baku and other major cities, and more recently during larger international events such as the European Olympic Games in summer 2015 or the Formula One championships (2016-2019). In 2015, a presidential decree ruled that religious symbols, slogans and ceremonies may only be used and performed inside places of worship, near sacred sites, or during official, state-orchestrated ceremonies.

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<sup>6</sup> Alongside intense state monitoring, the privileged religious communities receive a donation from the Presidential Fund. The amount is not fixed, and these communities receive far higher amounts than non-traditional groups. For example, an imam at a mosque in Azerbaijan receives a monthly state salary of about 400 manat (\$235). In 2018, fourteen imams received a gift from the state of Azerbaijani-made Khazar cars. By contrast, some Shia imams who received their education in Iran and Iraq, or religious leaders at new 'purist' Muslim communities, are not supported by state funds.

These strict requirements have meant that performing the recently revived Shia Muslim Ashura mourning ritual outside mosques is now prohibited in Azerbaijan. Instead of the symbolic collective self-flagellation ceremony held in the streets on Ashura Day, an annual day of mourning for the martyr Husayn ibn Ali, the state now only permits the enactment of Ashura rituals indoors. In addition, instead of self-flagellation, a new secularized practice – medical blood donation – has been introduced and implemented at central and larger mosques and shrines.<sup>7</sup> The rule requiring worship to take place indoors or behind the walls of the church or mosque applies to other confessions and religious minorities too. For instance, public Orthodox Easter processions on the streets outside the Russian Orthodox churches have also been prohibited in Azerbaijan.

Finally, it is worth noting that recent oppressive changes to the state regulation of religious life recall the Soviet model of state-faith relations. For example, new regulations were introduced in 2015 according to which all religious buildings and prayer houses in the country are claimed as state property. The state has intervened in recent renovations carried out at mosques, churches and synagogues in Azerbaijan by installing new surveillance technologies. As one imam of a local mosque emphasized in an interview:

Inside the mosque, there are audio and video cameras installed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. There are cameras installed by the Foundation for the Promotion of Moral Values and the Caucasus Muslim Board. The mosque is monitored inside and outside 24 hours a day. And before we had these cameras, there were no attempts to provoke a conflict. A person must be able to adapt to the society in which he lives. If they don't, they will be isolated from the society.

Religious presence is ambivalent in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, where administrative regulations

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<sup>7</sup> A similar prioritization towards 'acceptable' and 'non-acceptable' religiosity 'good' and 'bad' forms of public expression of religion is observable in the European urban contexts. See in Martinez-Arino and Griera 2020.

can either curtail or promote particular religious expressions and configurations.

Different actors are involved in this uncertain process of restoring and rebuilding sacred sites in the post-socialist city: state authorities, city planners, official religious institutions, international organizations. In studying the religious presence and diversity of religious place-making strategies in the context of post-Soviet Azerbaijani urbanism, we have to look at grassroots religiosity and vernacular sacred sites. They emerge in a non-religious environment and are embedded in mundane urban infrastructures and ordinary residents, who also can help shape and produce religious configurations in the urban space. A number of recent studies are critical of the dichotomy that is usually drawn between the secular and religious domains in post-socialist societies, calling for the revision of the boundary between the secular and the religious. I agree that interactions between these two domains are complex and that the urban context provides good examples of their interweaving. In this context, the term 'urban-religious configuration' can be useful, referring as it does to an assemblage of material, spatial, symbolic and sensuous spaces and practices in which the religious and the secular/urban overlap and intermingle (Lanz 2018, Burchardt 2019). Like Lanz, I suggest avoiding treating the secular/religious dichotomy as involving two extreme poles with clear-cut boundaries. From this perspective, the process of religious place-making in post-Soviet Azerbaijan includes formal and informal, official and vernacular sets of religious practices and expressions aimed at the symbolic and material appropriation of the urban space.

### **Baku**

Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, with a population of 2.3 million, is a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional city. Over the last decade, it has undergone a radical transformation, from a peripheral socialist city to a neo-liberal city and regional metropolis on the Caspian Sea. Baku developers have sought to present it to the inter-

national arena as 'the Dubai of the Caspian Sea', an oil city with luxury hotels and iconic architecture (Valiyev 2018; Guliyev 2018, Darieva 2015). In a process of urban renewal supported by the authorities, private investors and prominent architectural names such as Zaha Hadid (Aliyev Art Centre) have put a shiny new gloss on the city.

To achieve a level of globality and a ranking on the city scale, the 'worlding' (Ong 2011), Baku invested in several costly landmark projects, including renovations, the redevelopment of globally valuable places such as the airport, promenades, shopping malls and convention centres for mega events. The city is well connected to 66 international airports with (before the pandemic) non-stop flights to global cities such as London, Moscow and New York, three flights a week to Israel, and direct flights to important Shia Muslim pilgrimage sites in Iran and Iraq.<sup>8</sup>

However, one should bear in mind that the last two decades have also been marked by abrupt social change in the city, a rapid and traumatic wave of privatizations and inadequate development of urban policies and planning, leading to a high level of social polarization and the demolition of old neighbourhoods and historical residential zones. The rapid transformation of urban spaces in Baku has been accompanied by debates about 'frightening urbanism', as one local journalist, Vyacheslav Sapunov, reflected in an interview on the effects of aggressive beautification projects in central Baku. In many cases, these processes are associated with the bulldozer purification of urban spaces (Darieva 2015; Roth 2018; Valiyev 2018), which ordinary people experience as arbitrary change threatening everyday life and urban sociality. Recent urban reconstruction has reduced the extent of recreational public spaces such as urban parks, promenades and small green areas. Due to urbanization and neo-liberal re-development, some old mosques and shrines have had to 'make way' for

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<sup>8</sup> Data based on an analysis of international flight connections available on Google.

city development projects, new parks and commercial centres.

Here we can speak of a place where the Shari'ah fundamentally resided, and this is undeniable. However, the Shari'ah says that whenever a place is required to serve people, in the form of a road or public facilities, a change in the location of a mosque or a cemetery, which is also considered inviolable, can be carried out. The Shariah says that if it is necessary and for the benefit of society, then the movement of holy places is allowed, in particular, a change in the location and building of the mosque. However, in other cases, it is inviolable."  
[Elimlar Akademiyasi Mosque]

Religion is not the crucial element shaping the modern skylines and urban materiality of Baku. One can observe fluid forms of religiosity that are not tied to existing institutionalized arrangements around mosques and churches. Due to the Soviet past and administrative repression, religious expressions do not always take place inside mosques and churches, but can be found in alternative spaces. The question is how local vernacular Muslim practices and non-canonical faiths (re)inscribe themselves into urban spaces in the context of the restrictive top-down policy against public manifestations of religiosity.

### The boneless saint's prayer house

Passengers riding on the buses and *marshrutkas* (public transportation) in Baku can see a small portrait next to the driver's seat. The person depicted is Mir Mövsum Agha (MMA) or Et-Agha, 'the boneless saint'. Bakuvians of different social and ethnic backgrounds worship MMA for his ability to heal without medication and perform miracles. For instance, they believe that the saint can protect Bakuvians from car accidents and bad luck, regardless of his apparent physical disability. This sign of the sacred in urban traffic goes back to traditional Shia folk beliefs in saint veneration as a non-canonical place of 'little' Islam and an informal prayer site. In Azerbaijan, shrines have often been seen as a rural phenomenon, and certainly many Shia shrines are located in villages or between settlements. However, within the last century they have also been increasingly



Figure 2. Image of Mir Mövsum Agha, the boneless healer. Source: Tsypylma Darieva, Baku 2016.

absorbed by the city due to urbanization, urban growth and migration.

Sacred folk sites (*pir* and *ziyarat gakh*) are usually viewed in the context of popular beliefs, which neither conflict nor merge with official mainstream religion. Indeed, they can be characterized as self-governing, and their status seems to be negotiable. Although there are no fixed legal frameworks for the operation of sacred Shia folk sites, new and larger shrines are gradually coming under state control and surveillance through different channels. One such channel is the state-sponsored supply of free gas and electricity to sacred sites.<sup>9</sup>

Two prominent places of worship in Baku are associated with the 'boneless saint': a larger shrine at the cemetery in Shuvelyan, close to the Caspian shore; and his former house in the Old City<sup>10</sup> in central Baku, which was turned into

<sup>9</sup> The famous Bibi-Heybat shrine in Baku, which was destroyed in the 1930s, was restored at the end of the 1990s by the former president of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev, the father of the current president.

<sup>10</sup> Baku's Old City has undergone a massive transformation over the last twenty years. Once perceived as a place inhabited by traditional rural Azeri migrants,



Figure 3. A painting of the healer's house in Baku, Old city. Source: Tsypylma Darieva 2016.

a pilgrimage site after WWII. In the following I focus on just one semi-private pilgrimage site in central Baku. Built at the end of the nineteenth century, Mir Mövsum Ağa house is a two-storey house in the old Baku district of İcherişəhər (İcərişəhər). The ground and first floors of the house are usually shared by both Ağa's relatives and pilgrims. The place of worship is located in a tiny room without windows decorated by a framed black and white portrait of Et-aga and his armchair covered by a cloth with writing in the Persian script. Pilgrims leave donations or *nazir* (alms in a bowl) on a small table, which a caretaker empties every twenty minutes.

The house can easily be approached from three different directions: from the old city, from the main avenue and from the main gate to the old city. Its door remains open day and night; visitors come from dawn to dusk. In my afternoon observations over the course of a week in April 2015, more than two hundred people typically visited the site in the space of two hours.

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after a massive restoration and renovation campaign, was gentrified and turned into the main tourist attraction.

Their visit do not last long, about five minutes. Compared to traditional pilgrimages to larger shrines or prayers in a mosque, it is a very brief and informal activity. To draw a comparison with modern urban behaviour, such as 'fast food' and the 'take-it-to-go culture', we can call this 'fast prayer' and 'blessing-to-go'. Urbanites come to the holy place with personal desires (*niyyet*) and plans linked to people's daily life requests, from passing examinations at school and universities without having to pay *baksheesh* (a facilitating payment made to officials) via conceiving a child and having a good marriage to buying a proper house or undergoing successful surgery. Many pilgrims told me that they come to receive Ağa's *bioenergetika*, to find inner peace in the hectic city life. Individuals, families, groups of students or schoolchildren, female and male worshippers, taxi-drivers and migrants, professors and politicians, are among the visitors to Mir Movsum Ağa's shrine and the saint's house. There are no strict regulations for the choreography of prayer in İcərişəhər. In addition, there is no strict spatial separation of visitors to the shrine; male and female pilgrims use the same entrance. Visitors

come on foot or by public transportation, more rarely by car because of the traffic in central Baku.

Some Bakuivians who visit the sacred site in their city view the process of *pir* visitation as an act resembling or even replacing the grand pilgrimage (*hajj*) to the Kaaba in Mecca. It is precisely this belief and the act of venerating saints that new Muslim 'purists' claim to be incompatible with normative Sunni Islam. Sunni 'orthodox' believers increasingly denounce *ziyarat gakh* as sites of 'pagan' worship and condemn visits as an 'incorrect' form of Islam. Despite these denunciations, the popularity of saint veneration is not diminishing.

The appeal of the pilgrimage to Et-Agha's sanctuaries is universal among men and women because it is thought to help with such a wide range of problems, improving one's situation by alleviating general uncertainty, infertility, family problems, unemployment and illness in parents or children. The desire to buy an apartment or a house or to pass an exam at school or university without having to bribe officials is another motivation for people to venerate Agha's power. One Bakuivian intellectual expressed his understanding of why the majority of the pilgrims are women as follows:

Usually you can find two types of people at pirs' shrines, lucky and unlucky people, both female and male. The fact that you see more women at this place says that they are less lucky and successful in this city, as it is not so easy to hold together a job and a family. The practice of visiting Agha's house is popular among businesswomen, artists and politicians.

As the guardians of the saint's house emphasized in March 2015, 'saints do not discriminate on religious or ethnic grounds'. Associated with the Soviet past, there is an inclusive type of narrative that tells how the boneless healer was venerated by non-Muslims, in particular by Russians, Armenians and Jews during World War II. One such story revolves around an Armenian soldier who visited Agha's house before being sent to the front line and tells how MMA became his patron

and protector for the rest of his life. At Agha's funeral in 1950, it was this Armenian soldier who carried the saint's coffin on his shoulders from the door of the saint's house in İcərişəhər to the cemetery in Shuvelyan. This basic openness and inclusivity extends not only to local non-Muslims, but also to tourists, expats and foreigners living in Azerbaijan, such as Loreen, the Swedish winner of the Eurovision Song Contest in 2012, of Moroccan Bedouin background, who was the only entrant to meet local human rights activists in 2012.

It is in this way that popular Shia saint veneration practices construct flexible 'shared' spaces. Marking a significant threshold, they not only mediate a connection with the other 'divine' world, they also serve as sites where the city's secular life and urban narratives are inscribed and lived. Practitioners announce and appropriate their sites on a rather informal private level and in an 'unspectacular' manner. Caretakers maintain good relations with neighbourhood residents by organizing an annual *ehsan* feast for members of the local community and honourable guests, including members of the city administration. In the 2000s, the saint's house in Baku was actually transformed into a 'branded' urban site of worship performed in miracle stories about the saint's power to resist political regimes during the Soviet past. The key power of informal shrines lies in their openness, flexibility and material hybridity, which make possible cross-conventional frameworks and demonstrate the sharing of places of belonging.

Unlike to new, for instance Salafi Muslim communities and 'non-traditional' Protestant Christian communities, the Azerbaijani state does not place any serious restrictions on maintaining and restoring traditional *pir* shrines or *ziyarat gakh*. On the contrary, many caretakers of the larger shrines have started to receive a regular income from the state-sponsored Board of Caucasus Muslims (*Qafqaz Məsəlmanları İdarəsi*), which they do not refuse. Moreover, sacred folk sites are undergoing changes, as they are increasingly becoming subject to controls by the state and

the clergy, as well as criticism from new 'purist' Muslim communities and educated young people who regard such traditions as 'backward' and 'pagan' (Darieva 2018).

### **We are not 'Wahhabi', we are a Bahai community**

Most research on religious diversity in Azerbaijan is focused on the rise of Muslim institutions and radical Islam practices, with fewer studies conducted on the multiple small-scale religious places and non-Muslim religious practices in Baku. There is a variety of smaller religious groups, practices and non-unified, less visible and less state-organized places of worship that function within and beyond imposed structures. A number of smaller religious communities do not maintain their own prayer houses in Baku. For instance, four Protestant communities currently rent the former German Church building *kirkha*<sup>11</sup> in central Baku, which belongs to the State Conservatory, bringing together Lutherans, Protestants, and the New Life and Vineyard Churches (see Aliyeva's paper in this special issue). These 'homeless' Christian communities apparently do not mind not having their own prayer houses or buildings. Indeed, they are proud to have a right to hold services in *Kirkha*, due to its symbolism and the validity it confers on their existence in Azerbaijan.

The Bahai religious community of Baku is rather invisible in terms of religious place-making. Bahaim is a monotheistic universalistic religion that first arose in Iran in the nineteenth century and subsequently spread all over the world. Its main temple is located in Haifa, Israel. For a country like Azerbaijan that officially follows an ideology of religious tolerance and multiculturalism, the Bahai faith might be seen as a natural fit: its practitioners recognize Mohammed, Jesus Christ, Moses, the Buddha, Krishna and Zoroaster as manifestations of one God. The

<sup>11</sup> The building of the German Lutheran Church is known in Baku as the 'kirkha', a slightly deviated pronunciation of the German term "Kirche" meaning 'church'.

Bahais preach humanistic unity, the essential worth of human beings and the value of the traditional family across the world. The Bahai faith can be described as a syncretic religion, a combination of earlier beliefs with Shia Islamic, Christian and Buddhist roots (Smith 1987). However, Bahais view themselves as a distinct and vernacular religious tradition with their own scriptures and laws, where much emphasis is placed on the harmony between religion and science.

The Bahai community in Baku is a re-established religious group (1991) with a longer history going back to the late nineteenth century. The approximately 2,500 members of this group consider themselves the oldest Bahai community in the world. In terms of ethnic composition, the community mainly comprises ethnic Azeris, but also has Tatar, Jewish and Russian members. Most members are educated 'middle-class' urbanites speaking both Azeri and Russian, such as teachers, doctors, lawyers, engineers and technical intelligentsia, and women are in the majority (68-70%). Given the community's openness towards new members, Baku's Bahai community is growing, in particular among educated young people and students. The growth of the community depends on individual conversions. The basic structure of the community includes spiritual services on Saturdays and Sundays and during the week; active community members offer religious and broader educational classes for children. Instead of a spiritual leader (imam or priest) with responsibility for the community's morality and rituals, an elected council of nine members coordinates administrative, financial and public relations, including cultural events. As a council member responsible for public relations explained to me in May 2019: 'I am not a religious leader, I am just a member of the Baku Bahai Community Council and a professor at Baku State University.'

A distinctive feature of the religious community is its social and financial nature. The Bahai community emphasizes its financial independence: the council even refuses funds from the State Committee for Working with Religious



Figure 4. A Bahai performance during a regional conference in 2014. Source: <https://news.bahai.org/community-news/regional-conferences/baku.html>

Organizations.<sup>12</sup> Philanthropy is accepted only from members of the congregation. To avoid any suspicion of receiving and using grants from outside Azerbaijan,<sup>13</sup> Bahais in Baku attach great importance to the transparency of their finances.

We are probably the only community that has open bank accounts. That is, we do not hide the aid that comes to us. When we were buying land, our community was not as strong, and our financial resources were weak. The state knows that we write letters, bring money from abroad and solve our problems. Therefore, we are not hiding anything. We know that the state is fighting terrorism. A monitoring system identifies and prohibits any channels of illegal money coming into the country. But we still keep in touch with the outside world, and we do not hide anything; everything is open. [Chairperson, Bahai Faith Community, January 2019]

Most public religious activities take place indoors. Some gatherings are held at the community office in the Caspian Plaza business centre, while other social events take place in a larger rented apartment in central Baku near Nisami metro station. Young Bahais gather informally in small groups for an early morning prayer on a beach or in a park close to the Caspian Sea. Urban public places (hotels, offices and beaches) seem to reflect a decentralized principle of Bahai religiosity and may function as laboratories of new urban

<sup>12</sup> The Bahai community is one of very few religious organizations not to receive financial support from the state.

<sup>13</sup> Compare with <https://www.icnl.org/resources/civic-freedom-monitor/azerbaijan>

spirituality. These spatially invisible practices are similar to the evangelical churches' home- and social network-based prayer houses and differ in this sense from Muslim, Russian Orthodox and Jewish places of worship. When asked whether prayer rooms should be created in 'profane' urban public spaces such as shopping malls, the chairperson of the community emphasized the value of the 'domestic' and 'invisible' model of religiosity:

I think worship is a personal, intimate thing. It is a sacrament between man and God. In my opinion, it should not be done in public. Sometimes, we see people praying in the middle of the street, surrounded by cars and crowds, or in a car, a place of movement or crowds of people. How many houses of worship are built in Azerbaijan, people have to go to these places to perform religious rituals. There is no need for additional expenses for these purposes. [Practitioner, Bahai Faith Community, January 2019]

Although historically Bahais belong to a local tradition going back to the middle of the nineteenth century in Iran and Azerbaijan's Nakhichevan exclave, they have been persecuted by Sunni and Shia Muslims as suspicious 'heretics'. In particular, for the early Soviet authorities, the Bahais' supposedly 'merchant', bourgeois background, alien to communism and socialist ideals, made them a target of discrimination. Under the influence of the anti-religious campaign during the Soviet period, the Azerbaijani authorities still stigmatized the Bahai faith as a 'wrong' religion with connections to Iran and thus as not 'truly' Azerbaijani. Ironically, here we can observe a rather uncritical attitude to the Soviet past on the periphery of the empire: the authorities in independent Azerbaijan remain faithful to the pre-Soviet colonial and Soviet-style practices of dividing the population into 'own' and 'other'.

For the state authorities, the greatest stumbling block to dealing with re-emerged religious plurality is their persistent conviction that ethnicity has to cohere with religious belonging, i.e. that ethnic Azerbaijanis have to be Muslim. In some cases, Bahais are accused of being under foreign influence, whether from Iran or elsewhere. As

a result, the State Committee for Working with Religious Organizations has classified Bahais in Azerbaijan as a 'non-traditional non-Muslim community'. This 'othering' principle has been criticized by one of the community's leaders, who describes the Bahai community as one of the 'traditional' religious communities in Baku (*dini icma*), comparable in status to the Russian Orthodox Church or Ashkenazi Jews in Azerbaijan.

We are all Azerbaijani, and the majority of our members are Azeris, not Russians or other nationalities, as in the case of the Georgian Bahai community. We do not differ from other Azeris in terms of nationality, language, clothes or food preferences. But participating in our summer schools and social projects is crucial for us, and in this way we differ from other teachers or lawyers in Baku, who accept everyday corruption and take money from the students. (May 2018)

While Bahai practitioners are not seen as posing a substantial threat to Azeri national cohesion, the state classifies them as a non-traditional religious organization. By contrast, the Bahai leaders consider themselves part of a vernacular and local religion:

How we can be non-traditional if the homeland of the Bahai religion is the territory of northern and southern Azerbaijan (now Iran). Even when there was a Bahai movement, 80 to 90 per cent of the representatives of that movement were Azerbaijani. Seven of the Báb's faithful disciples were Azerbaijanis. One of the only eighteen female disciples, Tahira Gudratova, was also Azeri. The Bahai religion is a religion created in Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijani sphere. How can this religion be non-traditional? [Chairperson, Bahai Faith Community]

In an interview, the public relations manager emphasized the importance of communicating the moral principles of the Bahais to the wider public in Baku and increasing their visibility as a 'good' and loyal community. In his view, the restrictive policy of registration, a lingering stigma, and the lack of information about Bahais' spiritual and philosophical principles have led to a hostile attitude towards Bahais on the part of the state authorities and city administration. In this context, an application made to 'return' to the community the territory of the histori-

cal Bahai temple in central Baku, which was destroyed during the communist anti-religious campaign, was rejected.

We have produced a website for non-Bahai Azerbaijani to spread correct information about our faith. Many people confuse us 'Bahai' with 'Wahhabi', the fundamentalist Muslims! Even the state authorities think in this way. For instance, the landed property administrative centre made a mistake in their records, confusing us with Wahhabi, and we were not able to buy property. (Interview February 2019)

Despite the refusal to return the historic Bahai temple to the community, Bahais are not restricted in their religious practices. They seem to be rather flexible in their spirituality and spatiality, maintaining their religiosity without territorially fixed places of worship:

The situation is a little different now. For example, our centre on Nizami will probably be demolished in about three to four years. The city-planning and architectural regulations stipulate that residents of demolished homes will be provided with new space in constructed buildings in the same location. Currently, the centre is housed in a room with an area of 250 m<sup>2</sup>. If they demolish that house and build a new one, we are sure the state will give us the space. Moving or renovating is not a problem for us. We are not tied to any space. [Chairperson, Bahai Faith Community]

Places of worship for religious minorities in Baku therefore do not have a permanent existence. Religious gatherings happen in places that are not necessarily strictly confined to 'religious use'. They are defined by practitioners as secular and profane (a hotel or an office), and at the same time used temporarily as alternative spaces for sacredness. As Bahais gather in private rented houses or apartments in central Baku, their religious group can be characterized as a form of fluid urban spirituality with its invisible pragmatism, strong sense of sociability and explicitly critical attitudes towards corruption, unemployment, capitalist ideology and the growing individualism in Azerbaijan. Addressing poverty and the value of education, Bahais cooperate with the Krishna community, smaller Christian communities and secular NGOs. It seems that Bahais are

empowered by an alternative 'urban spirituality', negotiating a sociability that state institutions and elites are no longer able or willing to fulfil.

### Conclusion

Azerbaijan offers fruitful arenas for the study of the dynamics of religious pluralization in urban spaces and the ways practitioners appropriate their places in those domains in which religion is seen as a source of national heritage or as a threat, and where legal frameworks (i.e. the laws on religious freedom) are constantly changing. This does not happen without fostering hierarchical relations between different religious communities and the state. While national laws and the recent restrictive state policy towards faith groups claim to be a source of religious regulation and of the tolerance of diversity, the urban locality 'on the ground' produces its own mode of religiosity in public spaces. In this paper, I have addressed these small-scale and less institutionalized religious practices as part of religious pluralization that is not necessarily anchored in the state-orchestrated religious infrastructure. As a big city, Baku provides a laboratory of emerging 'multiple moralities' where closure and openness depend strongly on state-sponsored infrastructure, but can also unfold in hybrid, alternative and more flexible modes ways of religiosity.

By exploring Azerbaijani dispositions between the limits and potentials for religious plurality, it becomes clear that although informal and non-traditional religious actors have limited access to state-sponsored infrastructures, they appropriate their own places for prayer. The limits of the public presence of religion do not mean that religiosity is being entirely pushed into private spaces again, as it was during the Soviet period.

With regard to frameworks for state regulations imposed from above, I have described two cases of a less institutionalized religious presence in Baku that are shaped by informality and sociability fostered by ordinary urbanites. Here, religious practices may represent both informality and resistance. New mechanisms creating semi-private and alternative spaces may emerge

in line with a critique of oppressive forms of state authority around the neo-liberal economy, corruption and urban renewal. In this case, profane spaces are temporarily infused with citizens' piety. This ambivalence is not always visible and can take fluid forms, but it is central to the resilience of urban-religious configurations and to navigating multiple moralities.

While the state authorities attempt to promote a new national model for being a 'good' Muslim, at the same time we observe the rise of grassroots sacred sites and those practices of prayer that exist without maintaining their own religious edifices. The insights into two selected urban-religious configurations, one located in a private house, the other in an office building, shed light on a less visible dynamic of religious place-making in Azerbaijan, which can be described as a strategy of sharing a place. The restrained visibility of the Shia folk shrine and the invisibility of Bahai practitioners become part of the mundane use of urban and residential spaces and tactics for maintaining a presence in the city that goes beyond the state-sponsored monumentality.

By sharing space with non-religious actors and relying on mundane urban structures, religious practitioners use a variety of urban spaces on a temporary basis. In this way, invisible prayers and the sense of folk piety provide what can be described as their own 'freedom', as well as alternative opportunities for suppressed expressions of urban religiosity in post-Soviet Azerbaijan.

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