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RELIGIOUS LIFE AND EDUCATION IN AZERBAIJAN

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Abstract

Azerbaijan whose history dates back to very old times has witnessed lots of events. Although different religions e.g. Buddhism, Christianity, Manichaeism, Totemism, Fetichism and the fire-worshipping have existed in Azerbaijan's religious history, a radical change in the region has started with Islam and Islam, with all its elements, has become a determinant factor in Azerbaijan's religious-cultural identity. Despite all the difficulties Azerbaijan had subjected to since the ancient times up to the present, it has survived to this day by preserving its national and religious identity. Religious life and religious education in Azerbaijan throughout history have been experienced fundamentally.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, Religion, Life, Education, Religious Life and Education.

Introduction

I. A Brief History of Azerbaijan

Several states were established and continued their dominance in the territory on which the present-day Azerbaijan is now situated. Azerbaijan has begun to appear in history since the 6th century BC. The first state in the region was the "Kingdom of Atropates" which was set up by the Ahameni commander SahrpAtropates. The state was named as "Atropatene", meaning "Atropates' Country". The word, later said as "Atrapatakan", in time was pronounced "Aturpatakan", "Azurbaycan" and "Azarbaygan" in Farsi, Sasanid and Syriac successively and, lastly, turned into "Azerbaijan" as in its current form in Arabic. Turks and Iranians called the region "Azerbaijan". According to some sources, the region was called "Azerbaijan", which means "home of flames", because of the combination of two words in Persian: the first one "azer", meaning "flame"- the result of the natural gas blazing on the land, and the second one "baygan", meaning "place, spot, home" (Bünyadov et al. 1994: p. 17).

After the Kingdom of Atropates, Selevkos, Romans and Sassanids established states on these lands. Turks dominated the region during the 4th and 5th centuries AD. Later, Sassanid ruler Nushirevan followed the policy of settling down Iranians into the area. As of VII century, the Muslim army that had already started to grow up in number began to conquer Azerbaijan, resulting in domination of the region by Muslims in 643. Abbasids ruled the region by Turkish Emirs, and following the fall of Abbasids, lots of dynasties and beyliks prevailed there. The Seljuk invaded Azerbaijan in the 11th century but they were unable to rule the country for a long time (Ismail, 1997: pp. 50-52).

After the 1015-1016, Oghuz tribes started to settle in the region, and although Tugrul Bey assigned his uncle and son to conquer the country in 1043, they got nothing at the end of the lengthy wars against the Byzantium. It was only during the reign of Sultan Alparslan that Azerbaijan came under the domination of the Seljuk (Ismail, 1997: p. 107).

Azerbaijan was dominated by Atabeys and Harzemsahs between the 12th and 13th centuries and then was invaded by Moghuls (1320), though Genghis Khan's sovereignty did not last long in the region. After Genghis Khan's death, Azerbaijan was occupied by Cuci nation. Following the Cuci nation, Azerbaijan was dominated first by Iranians and, after a short period of time, by Altınordu State (Bünyadov et al. 1994: pp. 307-350).

The first Ottoman campaign to Azerbaijan started as of the 16th century. During the wars with Safavids, even though Yavuz Sultan Selim conquered Tabriz 1514, the city was captured by the Safavids

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again. Suleiman the Magnificent took the city in 1534 and conquered Azerbaijan wholly in the following year. After Azerbaijan was taken the control of Safavids as a result of the public disorder in 1555, it was recaptured by the Ottomans during the reign of Mourad III. (İsmail, 1997: p. 208).

Several khanates were established on these lands, where Azerbaijan is now situated, during the 18th century. Clashes among the khanates went on until the end of 19th century. A war started between Russia and Iran on 10th July 1804. Under the terms of the Gulistan Peace Treaty that was signed on 13th October 1813, Azerbaijan was divided into two as North Azerbaijan and South Azerbaijan. Kacar Shahlık of Iran was unwilling to leave the lands of Southern Caucasia that the peace treaty imposed. Consequently, another peace treaty, Turkmençay, which required Nakhchivan and Irevan Khanates also be ceded to Russia, was signed between Russia and Iran on 10th February 1828. Creating Erivan Province from Yerevan Khanate in 1850, Russia laid the foundation of Armenian Republic, which would later be established. Even though there started rebellions against Tsarist Russia in those days, their consequences appeared at the end of the 20th century. Being free from the dominance of Tsarist Russia, Azerbaijan Republic was founded on 28th May 1918 under the leadership of Memmed Emin Resulzade. Thus, it was the first time in history that a Turkish state called "Azerbaijan" was established. However, the people's happiness of liberation was just for a short period of time. Azerbaijan Republic that last just 23 months was occupied by Russian Army on 28th April 1920 (Resulzade, 1990: p. 47). As a result, Soviet dominion started in Azerbaijan and Soviet regime was declared upon the invasion of Soviet Red Army on that date. Azerbaijan was ruled under Caucasian Federation together with Georgians and Armenians until it got its current status (Bünyadov et.al 1994: pp. 569-572). Azerbaijan, which became a member of United Soviet Socialist Republic on 12th March 1922, also became one of the fifteen republics that composed the Soviet Union on 5th December 1936, and some of its land was left to Armenians and Georgians on the same date. So, three republics - Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia-, which were under the Russian administration were founded on the land of Azerbaijan in Caucasia. Upon glasnost and perestroika policies that started in 1989 in Russia, turning to national and spiritual values began to appear in the north of the country. Riots occurred in the country in order to retake the regions and cities that were left to Armenians. In 1990, Soviet Red Army invaded the country, which declared its independence, causing the death of many people and collapse of lots of buildings. In spite of all these hardships, Azerbaijan gained its independence on 18th October 1991 after the fall of USSR (İsmail, 1997: p. 343).

II. Religious Life In Azerbaijan

A. Before Islam

Before the advent of Islam, Azerbaijan was a place where various religions or beliefs such as Judaism, Christianity and idolatry had already existed and the influence of Totemism, Fetishism, fire-worshipping and polytheism were felt on the people (Memmedov, 2005: p. 49). The ruins of some temples and Albanian scripts on old glass plates which are related to Christianity have been found in the archaeological studies carried out in Mingachevir – a city in the west of the country. It has also been reported, in various sources, the existence of schools in Aran in the 5th century in which religious rites were taught as well as teaching Christianity was compulsory (Bünyadov, 1989: p. 57).

Another example is Surhay Tower which is situated on a mountainside between Goychay and Agdash towns. There are lots of religious myths that are told about this tower. Besides, the name of the mountain on which the tower was built is also interesting. Historical sources say that the people living around the mountain, which was thought to be a volcano, worshipped fire because they always saw the fire – most probably natural gas- burning on top of it (Asgeroğlu, 2006: p. 6). Such historians as Belazuri and Abu Reyhan reported that Zoroastrianism arose in Azerbaijan. According to them in some other Azeri towns like Ganja, Kish village in Shaki district and in some others Zoroastrian temples were built, fire was always burnt in them and the people in the vicinity showed great respect to it. The "Maiden Castle" in Baku is also said to have been one of the Zoroastrian temples (Memmedov, 1978: pp. 9-10).

Some of the tribes who lived on these lands worshipped idols as their ancestors had done before the Islamic conquests. Those doing so prostrated trees, stones and things that they prepared with respect and sometimes idolized the sun and the moon (Paşazade, 1991: pp. 34-35).

One of the important factors which was rather dominant in the religious beliefs of the people who lived in those days was "The Tree of Life". This concept meant the death and rebirth of the nature, that is, something that expressed human's belief for resurrection and a life hereafter (Gasımova, 1999: p. 17).

Bronze, silver and golden jewellery findings besides silver coin relics that were found in the archaeological excavations in Arap Cebirli cemetery in Goychay district in 1970s are thought to belong to 4th and 8th centuries. "Chest Stone", which was also found here, attracts people's attention. It portrays a big

cross in the centre, and a small picture of water and a swimming fish on its edge that symbolises richness, beauty and purity. Historical sources show that this gravestone is a symbol of existence of Christianity on the lands of Azerbaijan. At the beginning of 1000s, the fact that these lands belonged to Gabala State that that represented the unity of the churches show that Christianity once existed in the region (Cebrayilov, 2005: p. 9-10).

Today, the second widespread religion in Azerbaijan is Christianity after Islam. Christianity entered this region in the 1st century AD, and spread throughout the country until the beginning of the 4th century. It maintained its popularity until the country was conquered by Muslims. Nevertheless, in accordance with the Christianizing policy of Tsarist Russia in 19th century, lots of Christians were made to migrate to the region.

B. Arrival and Spread of Islam in Azerbaijan

Azeri lands were conquered during the reign of Caliph Omar during the 7th century and then the country became a part of Islamic civilisation (Memmedov, 2005: p. 71). Later Caliph Othman put much effort so that Islam could spread in the region by placing troops into several cities, primarily Ardabil. Governor of Azerbaijan, then, Eş'as b. Kays el-Kindi had also a mosque built in Ardabil during the Ali's caliphate. Azerbaijan was a place that was strategically used in Caucasia during the Omayyads era. Azerbaijani lands first remained under the rule of the Omayyads until the 9th and 10th centuries and then the Abbasids (İbn Kesir, 1994: 203; Bünyadov et al., 1994: p. 129).

The fact that non-Muslim Khazars killed 140 thousand Muslims and oppressed the people by invading Dagestan, Derbent and Shirvan in 789 is a very important event in history of Azerbaijan. It is known that Dagestan people returned to idolatry as a result of this pressure. However, later, they adopted Islam again as a result of a series of practising of showing the true path by the Muslim scholars. During those days, a fire-worshipper called Babak emerged in the south of Azerbaijan and tried to spread Mazdek religion. As a consequence of lengthy wars, Babak captured Hematan and Isfahan by gathering lots of supporters around him. A Turkish-origin commander Haydar b. Kavus, known for his nickname "Afşin", was assigned to fight against Babak by the Abbasids. Eventually, Babek army was defeated between 837-838, he was caught and brought to Baghdad – to justice of Caliph Al-Mu'tasim- and then was killed. Subsequently, the current lands of Azerbaijan was included into Omayyad State territory after this event (Yıldız, 1991: p. 377).

Among the expanding annexed places during Caliph Omar was also Azerbaijan. Several mosques were built along with the announcement and spread and of Islam in all the conquered places in those days. This period is of significant importance to Azerbaijan, for these areas encountered with a new religion, set of values, understanding and civilisation. Even though the established culture struggled against this new belief and way of life, they, in time, became a part of this great civilisation through, at the beginning, yielding, then melting into it. Educational life in the country was not very vivid before the arrival of Islam. However, it started to revive half a century later when Islam first started to spread in the region (Yıldız, 1991: p. 377).

The people had adopted Islam and lived as Muslims until the Tsarist Russia arrived at the region. In parallel with the spread of Islam, education was started to be given in madrasahs* which were situated either next to or around the mosques (Samadov, 2009: p. 26). In these institutions such sciences as Arabic, nahiv and sarf (Arabic grammar) and astronomy, besides religious sciences were taught. When we closely look at the medieval history of Azerbaijan, we see that thinkers and poets like Fuzuli, Nizami and Katran Tabrizi were all trained in those madrasahs (Bünyadov et al., 1994: p. 313).

During the Umayyads period, a quite number of mosques were also built and educational activities were carried out in all regions of Azerbaijan. In Derbent, most of whose population was Muslim, as many mosques as the number of neighbourhoods were built and these mosques were given the name of these neighbourhoods. Khazar, Palestine, Damascus and Mosul mosques are some examples of them. Furthermore, a great, central mosque, which is still present, was also built so that Friday prayers could be performed in crowds. The presence of these mosques indicates the presence of religious education in the country (Samadov, 2009: p. 56).

*In particular Shaki, Ganja and Şamakhy were the cities where old madrasahs existed. According to the information reported from "Seyahatname" by Evliya Çelebi, besides there were 7 madrasahs and 47 local schools in Şamakhy in 1674, there were 47 madrasahs and 600 local schools in Tabriz. (Samadov, 2006: 26)

In the 18th century, during which Azerbaijan was in the state of small khanates, education was given merely by the religious functionaries. Children started their education in the institutions, that is, schools, under the control of mosques when they were 10 and then they continued junior school education in the madrasahs. Junior schools used to be called “*madrasah*” in those days. In addition to religious sciences, other sciences like medicine, philosophy, logic and literature were also taught. Qur’an education was compulsory for everybody (Bünyadov et al., 1994: pp. 558-559).

C. Religious Life and Education in Azerbaijan During the Tsarist Russia

Following the conflicts among the khanates between the end of the 18th century and beginning of the 19th century, Tsarist Russia invaded Azerbaijan lands. Under the terms of Gulistan and Turkmenchay treaties, which were signed in 1813 and 1828 successively, Azerbaijan was divided into two parts as the South Azerbaijan and the North Azerbaijan. The north was left to the Russians and the other to the Iranians. In order to keep Azeri Turks separated from Anatolian ones, Armenian state was established (Bünyadov et al., 1994: p. 571).

Education in the period of Tsarist Russia developed very rapidly. Educational activities in this period were carried out at schools and madrasahs and the number of these institutions reached 500-700. It is known that about 300 schools and madrasahs, in which 4700 students were trained, actively operated in 1860s in Shamakhy region.

These institutions served in or around the small mosques and buildings in general. The students whose numbers ranged from ten to one hundred were trained there. They were taught Qur’an together with Arabic and Farsi. There were private religious schools in those days as well. These institutions were built within the small mosques. Those who were between 14-16, knew Farsi and could speak their natural language were accepted into these schools. Education at madrasahs was free. Arabic, Farsi, subjects explaining fundamentals of Islam, literature, philosophy, logic, psychology and history of Islam were taught at these institutions. The training period was between 6-8 or 10-15 years and they were divided two as primary and high (Samadov, 2009: p. 48).

Tsarist Russia tried to pursue “Russianism and Christianity” policy in Azerbaijan, as it did in other regions under its domain, in order to keep the people in Azerbaijan away from the influence of the Ottomans and Iran and to secure border security.

In accordance with this policy whose main aim, in fact, was to expel Islam from Asia, it chose the way to melt Azeri culture in the Russian one by first making learning Russian available. In order to achieve this aim, several private schools were opened where both Russian could be taught and Russian culture could easily be imposed to Turkish children. Upon Russian schools being opened, learning Russian was made compulsory in the madrasahs, too (Tağiyev, 2013: p. 384). Tsarist Russia, on one hand, tried to have authority over the ulema (Muslim scholars) and mullahs who had considerable impact on the public in terms of religion, and on the other hand, forced the families to send their children to Russian schools to be educated so that the generations that were equipped with national spirit and values could be prevented (Rezultade, 1990: p. 22).

At the beginning of the 20th century, Azeri people, who felt deeply disturbed by Russia’s pressure, seemed to direct its way to Turkey in the field of education. A number of schools which could revive national and spiritual values were opened again through this process. In 1905, teachers from Turkey came to Azerbaijan and started to train Azeri children. Nevertheless, this did not last long. An insidious propaganda proposing that the education level in Azerbaijan was too low stemmed from Islam was carried out in those days and some ideas which put forward that Islam was against modern sciences were tried to be spread throughout the country. As a result of this nasty policy of Tsarist Russia, the ideology of political Islam was incorrectly reflected to Azeri intellectuals and this effort was, eventually, ignored by being regarded as if it were a kind of Turkism ideology. This ideology, carried by Tsarist Russia, was just an activity that would pave way to religious superstitions and fanaticism through the idea of Turkism ideology in order to hinder the awakening of Azeri Turks who, essentially, did not turn to Turkism, but to national, spiritual and religious values (Göyüşov, 2004: p. 10).

D. Religious Life And Education in Azerbaijan During the Russian Period

Releasing from impact of Tsarist Russia, Azerbaijan Republic was established on 28th May 1918 under the presidency of Memmed Emin Resultade. Yet the people’s happiness of freedom did not last long, for the country was occupied by Soviet Army on 28th April 1920 (Resultade, 1990: p. 47). Consequently, the Russian period started in the country. Following this event, all the nationalist, spiritual and moral values were put under pressure and religious privileges and religious classes were all abolished. Instead of the truth,

fanaticism and superstitions became more widespread since the religious functionaries, who seemed pious-but in fact were not- were actually hampering the development of the country by stating the economic and social retardation of the country originated from the religion – Islam (Göyüşov, 2004: p. 10).

The Soviet regime took its first step by ordering the closure of religious courts on 15th May 1920 in Azerbaijan in order to engrave its ideology into people's conscious (Göyüşov, 2004: p. 10). On 19th May 1921, the first constitution of Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic was approved by the Great Council of Soviet Republic. The 4th article of this constitution wrote: "Religion is separated from the state and education is separated from religion so as to ensure citizens' freedom of conscience. However, the citizens are given the right of freedom to declare whether they believe in a religion or not. This, in essence, pursued the goal of hindering the religious education, rather than paving way to it. In accordance with this aim, "Commission Against Religion", which was against the religion, was established on 8th January 1924 and "Godless Clubs" were established in villages, towns and cities besides founding "Courageous Atheists" alliance (Hacıyev, 2008: p. 339; Yunusov, 2004: p. 137).

In May 1920, teaching of religious beliefs, practice of worships and religious rites at madrasahs were all forbidden. Religious education was banned at schools, madrasahs which were run within the mosques and even in houses (Bünyadov, 1998: p. 318). As of 1920, the practice of Hajj -pilgrimage- for all and visiting holy places in Iraq and Iran for those who were Shiite ones, were not permitted. Religious courts and all the madrasahs were completely closed in 1924 and 1928 successively. Furthermore, all the religious foundations were taken under control until 1936. Abolition of Arabic alphabet in 1929 affected the religious life negatively. Azeri Muslims' relation with other Muslims in other countries was totally cut off after it was included in the USSR in 1936 (Bünyadov, 1991: p. 318).

Activities of the religious functionaries were also restricted in the USSR. They were forced to present a written statement writing that they would not have a religious faith and not serve the religion any longer. Intellectuals who stood against Russianism policies were either exiled or killed between 1933 and 1937. Atheism was widely imposed in educational institutions and the adults were made sent to courses where atheism was intensively instilled. Hodjas – religious teachers-, effendis and several other religious people who never stopped serving the religion were exiled to either Siberia or to deserts of Kazakhstan in accordance with the laws which the USSR enacted for its own objective. Moreover, lots of estimable religious functionaries like Memmedkerim Mir Caferoğlu, Rıza Effendi Kadırov, Hafız Ramazan Efendi fell victims to the state terror of the USSR during the 1937 and 1938 (Bünyadov, 1993: p. 274).

One of the most important and effective methods that the Russians applied against Islam in Azerbaijan was the closure of the mosques. While there were more than 2000 mosques ((Paşazade, 1991: pp. 34-35) – in some sources about 3000- in the country until the USSR was established, in 1927 when the USSR was founded that number reduced to 1600, and in 1944 to 22. The number of the mosques between 1980 and 1990 in Azerbaijan is known to have been just 25 (Ahadov, 1991: p. 77). Most of the mosques which were closed were plundered or converted into cinema clubs; in addition, the holy places to visit and shrines were demolished. Performing religious ceremonies and rites as well as celebration of religious festivals were all prohibited. The Qur'ans and religious books in the mosques and houses were collected and destroyed (Göyüşov, 2004: p. 10).

The Russians wanted to build an atheist society which is merely based on materialistic philosophy. Therefore, they tried to implement all the measures like putting "atheism" lessons on the curriculum of schools and universities. Describing the religion as something made up, atheists strove to keep people away from the religion, stating that it was a lie and a phenomenon which arouse from the fear, weakness and cowardice of humans from all walks of life. Survival of Islam against the Russian's endeavour to spread atheism was possible only by Azeri people's great sacrifice. Religious education was carried out in the houses secretly. Owing to religious ceremonies, worships and religious education at homes, religious and moral values, customs and traditions were handed down to future generations, though not entirely.

E. Azerbaijan's Religious Aspect Today

There is not an official religion in Azerbaijan Republic since secularism was constitutionally adopted in the country. Every belief is considered to be equal before the law. Most of the population in the country is Muslim (96%) and the rest of the population is composed of Christians (2.5%), Jews (0.3%) and those who belong to other religions with a small quantity.

Christianity in Azerbaijan is essentially represented by Proslav, Catholic and Protestant sects and there are more than 15 active churches throughout the country. The Jews in Azerbaijan is divided into three parts as Mountain Jews, European Jews and Georgian Jews, and there are some differences in respect of their beliefs and the way they worship. The population of Jews, in general, is around 16 thousand and the most

populous group of it is Mountain Jews with nearly 11 thousand people. They speak Tatça- a Farsi accent- and they have culture centres and media organs. There are six active synagogues across the country, two of which are in Baku, two of which in Quba and the other two are in Nakhchevan. The Jewish Synagogue whose construction was completed in 2003 is the largest one in Europe.

There are two Muslims sects in the country: Shiite and Sunnis. 65% of Muslims is Shiite and 35% is Sunnis. Shiite Muslims are essentially Jafari - those who follow the Islamic interpretations of Imam Jafar, and the Sunnis are Hanafi, and partly Shafi, who follow the interpretations of Imam Hanafi and Imam Shafi successively (Bünyadov, 1991: p. 318).

F. Religious life and Education As of Liberation to Today

There have occurred lots of quite significant changes and developments in the field of religious affairs, as in all the other fields, in Azerbaijan since it gained its independence in 1991. Azerbaijan people who had had to live under the influence of Russia for 70 years returned to their moral and religious values. Even though the adopting a religion was absolutely prohibited during the Russian period, it started to gain its value slowly after the liberation. There have been really significant improvements in the field of religion over the past 20 or 24 years. Looking at the issue from this point of view, it should not be surprising that Azerbaijan has returned and absorbed its national and spiritual values, religious life and traditions in such a short time.

In order to revive the religious life in the country, some necessary measures were taken at the beginning of the 1990s. Azerbaijan took its first steps in order to offer education in a most appropriate and correct way through instilling the national feelings that would serve the country's benefits. Therefore, it has opened its borders and sent the citizens to some Muslim countries like Turkey, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan and Syria to receive religious education. It opened the Faculty of Theology within Baku State University as a result of the agreement done with Turkish Ministry of Religious Affairs in 1992. Baku Islam Madrasah which was opened in 1989 was enlarged and converted into a University in 1992. Besides, theology faculties were opened in some private universities such as Azerbaijan Beynelhalk University, Qafqaz University and Khazar University (Samadov, 2009: p. 67).

There was only one madrasah in Azerbaijan at the beginning of the 1990s, yet in 2000 there were 30 official madrasahs, and more than 100 non-official ones, Bible courses and a great number of charities which were both financed and governed by foreign countries (Tağıyev, 2013: p. 386).

One of the most important steps done in religious education in Azerbaijan was starting a PhD program in the History and Theory of Religions within Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences, Institute of Manuscripts in 1993. Additionally, Qur'an courses were made active in most of villages and towns in the country.* Another initiatives were opening such religious institutions as Faculty of National Ethics and Islamşunaslík in Pedagogic High Schools of Shamakhy and Shaki, Islam Madrasah of Aliabad, Madrasah of Islamic Sciences and Hafiz (learning the Qur'an by heart) in Shaki, Islam Madrasah of Hosrov, Shabnam Islam Madrasah of Baku, Rasul-u Ekrem Madrasah, Imam Husain , Madrasah of Mestaga, Madrasah of Theology, Baku Islam University and its branches in Zaqatala and Lankaran. However, most of these institutions were closed in time. Religious education exists in higher education but there are no religious lessons on the curriculum of primary, secondary and high school education. Now, the Faculty of Theology in Baku State University and Baku Islam University and some of its branches try to fill the lack of religious education in higher education.

Lots of religious activities in the field of extensive religious education are carried out by the religious functionaries in mosques, religious ceremonies and through mass media.

Conclusion

Having left significant traces in History, Azerbaijan has also led to important changes and development in the field of religious life and education. The country that has a rich religious past has, in particular after the spread of Islam, become a notable religious and scientific place.

Religious educational life which revived after the advent of Islam continued in the madrasahs within the mosques. A great number of mosques were built in all the regions of Azerbaijan and religious education and training was carried out there. However, Tsarist Russia tried to keep the ulema and mullahs who had great influence on the people under control and tried to force Azeri families to send their children to Russian schools so that they could be grown up without their own national spirit. Having liberated from Tsarist

*e.g. Goychay Central Mosque Qur'an course, Zakatala Juma Mosque Qur'an course, Jalilabad Priship Qur'an course, Ismayılı Qur'an course, Masallı Juma Mosque Qur'an course, Yanık Mosque Qur'an course.

Russia at the beginning of the 20th century, Azerbaijan was invaded again by the Soviet Army after 23 months later, though it established its own republic in 1918. Consequently, all the national and religious values were taken away from the people and all spiritual classes were abolished. In addition, religious courts and mosques were closed, and those which were closed down were converted to cinema clubs; holy places of visit and tombs were demolished; celebrating religious festivals, religious ceremonies and rites were all banned. Moreover, the Qur'ans and some other Islamic books in the mosques and houses were collected and destroyed. After having lived under the occupation of the USSR for 70 years, Azerbaijan then started to return to its own moral values. Religion, though thrown away during the Soviet regime, regained its value after the country gained its independence. In 20-24 years, theology faculties were established, madrasahs and Qur'an courses in many cities were opened. Today, extensive religious education being the case, lots of religious activities are carried out through mass media in mosques, religious ceremonies and rites.

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