

## Non-Muslim religious minorities in Azerbaijan

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Azərbaycan, officially known the Republic of Azerbaijan, a country in the Caucasus region of Eurasia, is located at the crossroads of Eastern Europe and Western Asia. It is bounded by the Caspian Sea to the east, Russia to the north, Georgia to the northwest, Armenia to the west and Iran to the south. The Azerbaijan Democratic Republic proclaimed its independence in 1918 and became the first secular democratic Muslim-majority state. In 1920, the country was incorporated into the Soviet Union as the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic. The modern Republic of Azerbaijan proclaimed its independence on 18 October 1991. The Republic of Azerbaijan is a multinational and multi-religious country. Majority of the population of Azerbaijan consist of muslims (96 percent). The national policy of this country is based on the principles of coexistence and tolerance of different nationalities, ethnic groups and religious minorities.

### Christianity in Azerbaijan

Christianity spread in the territory of Azerbaijan in the first centuries of the new era. The emergence of the first Christian communities here also coincides with this period. In the spread of Christianity in Albania, this period is called the apostolic (pro-Syrian) period and is associated with the names of the apostles Bartholomew and Faddei. The Elysee, one of the disciples of the apostle Faddei, built the first Christian church in the Caucasus in a place called Kish in the land of Agvan. The Azerbaijani state is carrying out important work to study the ancient and rich history of Caucasian Albania.

In Azerbaijan, Christianity is represented by its Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant branches, as well as various sectarian communities.

### **Protestantism in Azerbaijan**

The spread of Protestantism in Azerbaijan dates back to Tsarist Russia. Lutheranism and pietism are the first Protestant currents in our country. Thus, in 1819, the Württemberg pietists established the first German settlements in our country, Helenendorf (now Goygol) and Annenfeld (now Shamkir). In the following years, the Württemberg pietists established six more German colonies in our country. The Basel Evangelical Missionary Society also played a role in spreading Lutheranism in the Caucasus, as well as in Northern Azerbaijan. The missionaries of this society contributed to the strengthening of Lutheranism in the region by opening a missionary school and a printing house for Christian literature in Shusha in the 1920s. At the same time, Protestant communities belonging to Baptists and the Seventh-day Adventist Church were formed in various parts of Northern Azerbaijan during Tsarist Russia. Faced with persecution and pressure during the Soviet era, Protestants were able to operate freely after Azerbaijan regained its independence.

In Azerbaijan there are several protestant religious communities:

- Evangelical Lutheran Church
- Evangelical Christian Baptist community
- 7th day Adventists
- "Star in the East" Christian evangelical religious community
- Molokan is a religious community of spiritual Christian
- Albanian-Udi Christian religious community

Therefore at present, Protestantism is represented in our country by various currents. The Protestant communities registered in Azerbaijan are: "New Life" Christian Bible Community, Baku Evangelical-Lutheran Religious Community of the Redeemer, "Word of Life" Christian Religious Community, "Word of Life - 2" Sumgayit Christian Religious Community, Baku Evangelist "Agape" religious community of Christian Baptists, "Seventh-day Adventists" religious community of Narimanov district of Baku, "Seventh-day Adventists" Christian religious community of Ganja city, "Vineyard Azerbaijan" Christian religious community, "Alov" Christian religious community of Baku city.

### **Catholic denomination**

According to the number of Catholics in our country, it is second only to Orthodoxy and Protestantism. Although the Catholic community in our country is small, it actively participates in public life and is engaged in a wide range of charitable activities. There is a shelter for the orphans named after Mother Teresa, "Maryam" educational center and other charitable institutions under the Apostolic Prefecture of the Catholic Church in the Republic of Azerbaijan. At present, there are eight places of worship (5 churches, 2 chapels, 1 prayer house) under the Baku and Azerbaijan Diocese. Four of them are located in Baku, the others in Ganja, Sumgayit, Khachmaz and Lankaran.

In 1999, the Catholic community was registered in Azerbaijan. In 2000, a special building was purchased for the community and converted into a church. In 2007, according to the agreement between the Government of Azerbaijan and the Vatican, the construction of the Roman Catholic Church in Baku was completed.

In May 2002, the head of the Roman Catholic Church, John Paul II, visited Baku and met with government officials and members of the public. In April 2003, Greek Patriarch Bartholomew II paid an official visit to Azerbaijan, met with government officials, religious figures, leaders of Muslim, Christian and Jewish religious communities, and was received by President Heydar Aliyev. In 2003, the Albanian-Udi religious community was registered. The Albanian Church, built in the village of Kish in Sheki and considered one of the oldest temples in the Caucasus, as well as in the whole world, was thoroughly restored and put into operation in 2003. In May 2006, the opening ceremony of the Chotari Albanian-Udi Church was held on the site of the Holy Elysee Ancient Albanian Church in Nic settlement of Gabala region.

### **Orthodox denomination**

The Baku and Caspian Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church (now the Diocese of Baku and Azerbaijan), which was abolished during the Soviet era, was restored on the initiative of Heydar Aliyev. This is a clear example of the national leader's attention and care for ethnic and religious minorities. The Orthodox Religious and Cultural Center of the Russian Orthodox Church in Baku and the Diocese of Azerbaijan was opened on November 15, 2013.

Along with Russian Orthodoxy, members of the Georgian Orthodox Church also live in Azerbaijan. They mainly settled in Gakh region. There are 4 Georgian Orthodox temples: St. George Georgian Orthodox Church in Gakhingiloy village, St. Nino Church in Alibeyli village, St. Sameba Church in Kotuklu village, St. Michael's Church in Meshabash village. All these Georgian Orthodox temples were built in the late 19th century.

### **The Jews**

Jews have settled in Azerbaijan for more than 2,500 years. They have never been subjected to religious intolerance and discrimination in our country. At present, 7 Jewish religious communities are registered. There are 3 synagogues in Baku, 1 in Oguz and 1 in Guba. New Jewish synagogue in Baku in March 2003 was opened up and activated. In September 2003, the first Jewish secondary school funded by the Od-Avner Khabad Lyubavich International Foundation was opened in Baku. Also, according to the Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Azerbaijan No. 222 dated October 5, 2006, school No. 1 located in the Red settlement of Guba region was named after Isaak Abramovich Khanukov. The high level of tolerance and non-discrimination against Jews in the country was also emphasized by the delegation of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, which visited Azerbaijan on February 9-14, 2006.

## **The Bahá'ís**

In many Muslim countries, institutions and clergy consider Bahá'ís apostates from Islam and persecute them on this ground. In Azerbaijan, the Bahá'í community was registered by the state, fully enjoys freedom of religion and is not discriminated against by the authorities. Their presence in this Muslim dominated country has not created any hostility from the Shia or the Sunni communities.

## **Zoroastrianism**

Zoroastrian beliefs From the 3rd century onwards, it became a doctrine. Zoroastrianism began to spread in the territory of Azerbaijan up to Derbent due to the military-political success of the Sassanids. Iranian Zoroastrians were moved to these areas for propaganda purposes. At the same time, Zoroastrianism in Azerbaijan has acquired local features. Along with the dead, Caucasian Albanians also buried the jewelry and utensils they used while alive. Among the Azerbaijanis of that time, there is information about the custom of burying the dead in large jugs placed in a horizontal position after the bones were cleaned. There were also rituals of burying the dead in the ground, in pottery coffins, in underground tombs, and in hollow graves. There was a fierce struggle between the Sassanids and the Byzantines to expand their sphere of influence in the territory of Azerbaijan, as a result of which either Zoroastrianism or Christianity became stronger. Under such conditions, Islam, which came to the region, was able to spread rapidly and relatively peacefully. Since the Middle Ages, Zoroastrianism has failed to meet the requirements of Azerbaijan's cultural and political life and has completely lost its significance.

## **Hinduism in Azerbaijan**

Hinduism has been tied to cultural diffusion on the Silk Road. One of the remnants of once-dominant Hindu and Buddhist culture in the Caucasus is Surakhani, the site of the Ateshgah of Baku.