

RELIGIOUS STUDIES



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The Role of Religious Organizations in a Multi-Ethnic Region (using the Republic of Dagestan as an Example)

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Abstract

Introduction. The study focuses on the growing role of religions in the life of North Caucasian society. It shows that such religions as Islam, Christianity and Judaism have a high potential for ensuring social and political stability in the multi-ethnic region. The main theological contradictions between the currents in Islam is under analysis.

Materials and Methods. The theoretical and methodological basis of the research is formed by general philosophical methods and principles, ones of systematicity. The work also uses the methodology of discourse analysis of speeches and statements of political, public and religious figures, content analysis of mass media.

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Results. In the modern multi-ethnic region, religion and religious organisations play a significant role in the socio-political and spiritual and moral spheres. Consequently, the establishment of civilised state-confessional, inter- and intra-confessional relations contributes to the preservation of peace and stability and the consolidation of Dagestan society.

Discussion and Conclusion. The problems investigated in this article are not only theoretical but also practical, as Muslim, Christian and Jewish spirituality realise their role and responsibility in maintaining peace and tranquillity in a multi-ethnic, multiconfessional and multicultural region, orient people towards peaceful relations between different peoples and religions, and towards strengthening the common homeland – Russia. Among the important features of multi-ethnic Dagestan is the high level of Islamic religiosity.

Keywords: North Caucasus, Dagestan, Islam, religious extremism, religious organisations, youth

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Оригинальное теоретическое исследование

Роль религиозных организаций в полиэтничном регионе (на примере Республики Дагестан)

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Аннотация

Введение. В исследовании акцентируется внимание на возросшую роль религий в жизни северокавказского общества. Показано, что такие религии как ислам, христианство и иудаизм обладают высоким потенциалом в обеспечении общественно-политической стабильности в полиэтничном регионе. Проанализированы основные теологические противоречия между течениями в исламе.

Материалы и методы. Теоретико-методологическую основу исследования составляют общеполитические методы и принципы, принципы системности. В работе применена также методика дискурс-анализа выступлений и заявлений политических, общественных и религиозных деятелей, контент-анализ СМИ.

Результаты исследования. В современном полиэтническом регионе религия и религиозные организации играют значительную роль в общественно-политической и духовно-нравственной сферах. Следовательно, установление цивилизованных государственно-конфессиональных, меж- и внутриконфессиональных отношений способствует сохранению мира и стабильности, консолидации дагестанского общества.

Обсуждение и заключение. Исследуемые проблемы имеют не только теоретическое, но и практическое значение, так как мусульманское, христианское и иудейское духовенство осознает свою роль и ответственность в поддержании мира и спокойствия в полиэтническом, поликонфессиональном и поликультурном регионе, ориентирует людей на мирные отношения между различными народами и религиями, на укрепление общей для всех родины – России. К числу важных особенностей полиэтнического Дагестана следует отнести высокий уровень исламской религиозности.

Ключевые слова: Северный Кавказ, Дагестан, ислам, религиозный экстремизм, религиозные организации, молодежь

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Introduction. Today religion is a part of social life, existing alongside art, philosophy, law, science and is closely intertwined with them. In post-Soviet society, religious organisations have gained real freedom of conscience and space for their activities. There is federal and republican legislation in this area.

Due to the ongoing political processes in the world, the North Caucasus is acquiring the status of a region of priority importance for Russia's security. Since the collapse of the USSR, the Caucasus region of Russia has been an extremely important strategic node from the geopolitical point of view. Transcaucasian states have major economic transport and transit routes with Russia. The Caucasus directly borders Turkey, a member of the NATO. And the task of Western policy is to weaken Russia's position in this region. Since the noughties, we can observe here constantly fuelled separatism, nationalism and religious fanaticism. The West does not change its policy in its endeavour to foment internal conflicts in regions with crisis economic and socio-political situation in order to destroy and disintegrate Russia. The main emphasis is placed on the Republic of Dagestan, the special importance of which is determined by its geographical location (proximity to the largest countries of the Islamic world, access to the Caspian Sea and oil shelf, international transport communications).

Some constituent entities of the Russian Federation are regions of traditional spread of Islam, where more than 20 million Muslims belonging to more than forty ethnic groups live. This indicates that Islam is currently the second strongest and most influential religious denomination in Russia.

The role and importance of religions in North Caucasian society has grown in recent years. Islam, Christianity and Judaism, the traditional religions of the region, have a high constructive spiritual and moral potential and play a role in ensuring socio-political stability in a multi-ethnic society and in promoting humanistic spiritual and moral ideals.

The greatest influence of religion on various spheres of public life can be noted in such subjects of the North Caucasus as the Republic of Dagestan, the Chechen Republic and Ingushetia. The Republic of Dagestan is known to be the most multi-national and multi-confessional republic.

In modern conditions, the problems of preserving inter-ethnic harmony and intra-confessional peace and stability remain relevant for the development of Dagestani society. The ambiguous role of the religious factor in the life of modern Dagestani society, the complex problems of state-confessional relations, the need to strengthen ideological work to counter religious and political extremism are discussed in many scientific monographs and periodical publications [1–6].

Materials and Methods. The aim of this paper is to analyse the influence of religion and religious organisations on the socio-political and spiritual-moral sphere of a multi-ethnic region. For this purpose, a broad methodological toolkit is used, integrating the research capabilities of the methods of philosophy, sociology and political science. The systematic approach used in the study allows us to consider the influence of the religious factor on socio-political and spiritual and moral processes taking place in multi-ethnic Dagestan.

Results. The military confrontation in the South Caucasus and the desire of global geopolitical actors to extract immediate benefits from the current conditions pose serious threats to the stability and security of the North Caucasus region and Russia's national security.

Apart from the two armed conflicts (Ukraine, Palestine), the U.S. wants to ignite a new war, this time in the Caucasus, pushing Georgia to open a second front against Russia. Georgia is the only country in the Caucasus that borders all the republics of the North Caucasus. And if the U.S. succeeds in turning Georgia into a new springboard for a strike against Russia, it could affect everyone in the region.

Today, Europe, the US also support the horrific genocide of Muslim populations around the world. In Stockholm, Sweden, a woman demonstratively burns the Koran. The woman holds a cross over the burning book, marking the burning of the Koran on behalf of Christianity. Once again, there is an obvious attempt to clash the two religions. It should be noted that nowhere in the world Muslims respond to provocations with the burning of the Koran by burning the Bible or any other scripture. Muslims realise that these provocations do not come from the church or from people of deep faith, but from people who profess other values. And Russia is an example of peaceful coexistence of peoples and confessions.

Interfaith and intrafaith interactions are important for North Caucasian society. The region with the highest density of Muslim religious institutions is the Republic of Dagestan. As of 1 July 2021, there are 2,801 religious associations in Dagestan, of which 2,753 are Islamic, including: Muftiate of the Republic of Dagestan – 1, juma mosques – 1,337, neighbourhood mosques – 1,194, prayer houses – 196, universities – 6, madrasas – 16, madrasa branch – 2, Union of Islamic Youth – 1¹. Christianity ranks second in Dagestan after Islam in terms of the number of its followers. There are currently 42 Christian religious associations operating in the Republic of Dagestan. There are 12 Sunday schools attached to Orthodox churches, with about 280 students. There are six Jewish communities in the Republic of Dagestan. According to information on religious associations in the Republic of Dagestan as of 1 July 2022 provided by the Ministry of National Policy and Religious Affairs of the Republic of Dagestan, an extensive system of Islamic education has developed in the republic over the past 30 years. It is represented by three levels: higher (universities, institutes), secondary professional (madrasas) and primary (primechet schools, maktabas) educational institutions. The above data testify to the increased interest of Dagestanis in religion.

Islam is one of the factors shaping the identity of North Caucasian ethnic groups. It is one of the regulators of individual behaviour (in family and domestic practice) and, to a lesser extent, of social behaviour.

Since the 14th century, Islam in Dagestan has become the dominant system of religious and ideological ideas of the highlanders. All political, administrative and intellectual life of Dagestanis is organised within the framework of jamaats² and in relations between jamaats on the basis of Islam [4, p. 22].

The ideology of Islam was the basis of their entire social and political organisation. The words of the most authoritative alims were listened to, especially in cases of adoption of new legislative provisions in the jamaat and in cases of disputes between the jamaats. But they had no direct political power over their fellow countrymen.

The political structure of power and governance that emerged in Dagestan after the collapse of the communist regime in the USSR and embodied in the republican constitution of 1994 was a product of internal, natural and peculiar development of the republic and largely corresponds to the peculiarities of Dagestan society [4, p. 45]. Among these peculiarities, the most significant is the ethnic structure unique in the entire state and administrative post-Soviet space. The number of ‘Dagestani peoples’ currently includes 14 nationalities that are still registered in civil status acts and have ‘historical roots’ in Dagestan: Avars, Dargins, Kumyks, Lezghins, Laks, Azerbaijanis, Tabasarans, Russians, Chechens, Nogais, Rutuls, Aguls, Tats, Tsakhurs.

According to many experts [3, 4], the Islamic revival in the region took place against the background of the aggravation of the political struggle that was observed in the early noughties, and it is quite logical that one or another politician or group was ready to resort to Islamic arguments, telling people that their views were in line with the Islamic tradition.

Dagestan differs from all the constituent entities of Russia in its complex ethno-confessional structure. Not only more than thirty ethnic groups live in the republic, but also followers of all known confessions: Islam, Christianity, Judaism with their currents and sects. The Republic of Dagestan is a secular state. No religion may be established as state or compulsory. Religious organisations are separate from the state and are equal before the law³.

The separation of religious organisations from the state shall not entail restrictions on the right of their participants, including ministers of religion, to participate on an equal footing with other citizens in the administration of state affairs, elections to bodies of state power and bodies of local self-government, activities of political parties, political movements and other public associations. In the event of election or transfer to a position in the bodies of state power or local self-government, the activity of a minister of religion as a clergyman shall be suspended for a corresponding period of time⁴. This law is aimed at ensuring the constitutional right of citizens and human beings to freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, ensures the equality of all traditional confessions, determines the methods and forms of religious education in the Republic of Dagestan; prohibits the propaganda of inter-confessional antagonism⁵.

¹ Information on religious associations of the Republic of Dagestan as of 1 January 2022. URL: <https://minnacrd.ru/activity/12795> (accessed: 08.05.2024).

² Jamaats were densely populated and well-fortified polis-type settlements, surrounded by farms and other lands, which possessed final, atomic sovereignty, on the basis of which, through voluntary or voluntary-coercive agreements, larger co-composed political entities were formed.

³ Law of the Republic of Dagestan of 16 January 1998 N 5 “On freedom of conscience, freedom of religion and religious organisations” (as amended on 6 July 2023). Article 3. URL: <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/802038559?section=text> (accessed: 16.05.2024).

⁴ See *ibid*.

⁵ See *ibid*.

The problems of inter-confessional harmony have intensified in connection with the events that took place in the Republic of Dagestan in June 2024. On the day of the main Christian holiday of the Holy Trinity, armed militants attacked Orthodox churches and synagogues, as well as police officers in Makhachkala and Derbent. An antiterrorist operation was declared in the region. The scheme of action of the militants in Makhachkala and Derbent was the same: attacking a religious site, killing clergy and police officers, and setting fire to the building. Among the militants were relatives of Magomed Omarov, head of the Sergokala district of Dagestan. More than 15 police officers, as well as several civilians, including a Russian Orthodox Church priest, became victims of the terrorists. The National Anti-Terrorist Committee of the Russian Federation reported the neutralisation of five militants: two in Derbent and three in Makhachkala. In turn, the head of the republic, Sergei Melikov, reported the elimination of six militants⁶.

These strikes are being carried out against Russia by the banned organisation ISIS, which was considered already defeated. But when necessary at certain moments, this organisation strikes first and foremost on Russian territory.

Derbent is a symbol of the existence of the three Abrahamic Faiths: Islam, Christianity and Judaism. According to the laws of Islam it is categorically forbidden to hit peaceful cities, peaceful population, it is forbidden to attack temples, it is forbidden to touch clerics. An attack on religious organisations is a heavy blow to interconfessional and interethnic peace within the most ancient city, which is the cradle of three religious communities in Russia that have lived peacefully for fourteen centuries.

The greatest threat to the safe development of North Caucasian society is posed by the ideological causes of the spread of religious extremism and terrorism in the region. These include ideological contradictions between supporters of so-called 'pure Islam' and adherents of traditional Islam in the North Caucasus. According to I.P. Dobaev, such factors as the opening of information centres at the embassies of a number of Muslim states, the arrival of numerous representatives of religious missionary organisations, and the uncontrolled departure of young people for Islamic education contributed to this split in the North Caucasian Muslim Ummah. [3, p. 203].

Since the 1990s, one can observe the confrontation between different currents within Sunni Islam. The radical form among all currents is Wahhabism⁷, which entered Dagestan in the 1980s. The followers of Wahhabism call themselves 'Salafis'. The founder of this religious-political movement in Saudi Arabia is Muhammad ibn al-Wahhab (1703–1787).

At first, Wahhabism was active only in Saudi Arabia, where it originated. In the middle of the 18th century, this doctrine was in demand in the Arabian Peninsula due to the need to consolidate the Arab tribes living there in order to build their own state. In an effort to restore Islam to its purity, al-Wahhab began to preach strict observance of the principle of monotheism (tawhid), the rejection of the worship of Sufi saints (wali) and holy places (mazars and ziyarats), the need to purify Islam from late additions and innovations (bid'aa) and return to its original form. The main ideas of his doctrine were presented by al-Wahhab in the treatise 'Kitab al-Tawhid' ('The Book of Uniformity') [7].

The monograph by Dagestani scholars 'Religious and Political Extremism and Ethno-confessional Tolerance in the North Caucasus' examines in detail the religious and legal concepts of Wahhabism, analyses the nature of interpretation of the fundamental provisions of Wahhabi dogma, concerning innovations, specific interpretation of the theory and practice of jihad, including extremist literature available in the North Caucasus region [1].

According to Z.S. Arukhov, when identifying the main reasons that influenced the growth in the number of extremist groups and intensified the activity of radical Islamic movement groups in the modern world, three factors should be identified: external patronage, the impact of the Afghan syndrome and the legacy of the historical confrontation between East and West [2, p. 17].

On 5 June 1997, in Grozny a scientific and practical conference of representatives of spiritual administrations, religious figures, scholars, alims, jamaats, Islamic educational institutions and believers of Dagestan, the Chechen Republic and the Republic of Ingushetia was held on the theme: 'Moral and Political in Islam'. The aim: to find out the opinion of the most authoritative alims of the North Caucasus republics about the place and role of Wahhabism in the spiritual and socio-political life of the region in the present and future, the position of the Naqshbandi, Shazili and Qadiri tariqatis towards the Wahhabis, whose relations were becoming increasingly tense [4, p. 169].

The essence of all the speeches was to condemn Wahhabism and the need to unite all mountaineers under Imam Shafi'i Madhab, which is common to all Muslims of the North Caucasus.

Today, Dagestani Muslims representing various Madhabs⁸ (Shafi'i and Hanafi) are actively working to counter religious extremism. Thus, one of the demands of extremist ideologues is the rejection of the madhabs as an innovation in Islam.

The main contradictions between Wahhabis and Sufis:

⁶ The Cabinet of Ministers supported the idea of confiscations for organising illegal migration. URL: <https://news.mail.ru/politics/61642885/?from=swap&swap=2> (accessed: 24.07.2024).

⁷ Wahhabism is the name of a religious-political movement in Sunni Islam that emerged in Arabia in the mid-to-late 18th century on the basis of the teachings of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab and later became the ideology of the first Saudi state. The Wahhabi movement grew out of theological polemics concerning the purification of Islam from heretical innovations and the criteria of true monotheism and subsequently became a powerful factor in the ideological and political life of the Muslim world.

⁸ Mazhab (Arabic: way of following) is a doctrine, teaching, school in Muslim theology; a religious-legal school. The Sunni trend in Islam has formed four distinct but equally legitimate schools of law: Hanbali, Hanafi, Shafi'i and Maliki.

The Wahhabis accuse the Sufis that their Ustazi sheikhs know the hidden secrets. This is contrary to the Qur'an, for no one knows the secret things except Allah.

One of the pillars of the Sufis' Tariqat-Sufi ideas is the intermediary role of sheikhs between Allah and his servants. This in turn contradicts Islam: there can be no mediator between God and man. Traditional Islam in Dagestan of the madhhab of Imam al-Shafi'i rejected the Wahhabi doctrine, considering it a heresy and a deviation from faithful Sunni Islam. The Wahhabis, in turn, refuse to recognise traditional Sunni Islam and consider its followers as kafirs and apostates and call on them to declare jihad [4, p. 147].

Dagestan Wahhabism was not a reaction to a developing and transforming Islam. On the contrary, the movements of traditional (tariqat) and traditional orthodox (legal) Islam as distinct religious trends structured themselves and became a political force in Dagestan precisely as a conservative reaction to the growth of the innovative Wahhabi movement. In the course of this reaction on the part of traditionalists (tariqatists and legal orthodox clergy) to modernist interpretations of Islam, Wahhabism was declared an 'inadmissible innovation in Islam' or even not Islam at all [4, p. 108]. Wahhabi Islamic ideology, introduced by local and foreign adherents, served as an ideological basis for the open expression of protest of the rural population of Dagestan, which had been deprived during the 'reforms'. Wahhabism attracted rural youth, the vast majority of whom had been deprived of ideological support and clear prospects for the future.

In our time of the Internet, when uneducated or uneducated people can freely spread their beliefs to the masses, it is important to emphasise that the basis of disagreement is the Qur'an, Sunnah and millennia-old Muslim theology. Therefore, having learnt the Arabic language and the opinions of this or that current, to claim that this is the 'pure' Islam and your opinion 'according to the Qur'an and Sunnah' is the only correct one, is simply ignorance, which does not deserve attention, but motivates professional theologians to improve their knowledge and skilfully carry it to the masses [8].

In the Republic of Dagestan, just with the support of Sheikh Said-Afandi, an active process aimed at reconciling representatives of traditional Islam and the Wahhabis has begun. The most important step in uniting all Muslims of the Republic was holding a congress of scholars from both sides the Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Dagestan and Ahlusunn in the Central Mosque of Makhachkala on 24 April 2012. The aim of this congress was to build bridges of brotherhood between all Muslims of the Republic and to spread the purity of Islam through joint efforts. As a result of this joint meeting, agreed ways of cooperation were worked out.

The role played by representatives of the Muslim clergy in the region's media should be noted. In programmes such as 'Peace to Your Home', 'Dagestan', 'For Unity and Stability', the talk shows 'Point of Reference', 'Accents', 'Topical Interview', etc., they have launched activities to combat Wahhabi ideology. Representatives of the Muslim clergy also broadcast on Dagestan radio programmes about the canons of Tariqat Islam.

The interests of the clergy coincide with the national interests of the state in raising the spiritual and moral level of society, educating citizens in patriotism, respectful and friendly relations among themselves, and preserving and strengthening the institution of the family.

Islamic scholars for many centuries have rendered and are rendering invaluable allround assistance to people, taking into account all elements and facets of human nature, trying to satisfy the complex essence of the combination of material and spiritual cravings of man, warning of possible consequences. This is relevant even today, when in the course of the constant struggle between inner spiritual values and the external need to find means of subsistence, man increasingly sacrifices the spiritual for the material.

A person of faith who perceives the world from the perspective of divine creation and engages in spiritual practice is more open to comprehending the wisdom of life. The search for the spiritual is connected with the expansion of the boundaries of our consciousness, with the possibility of going beyond it, with the possibility of knowing what can only be experienced and felt within ourselves. And if spiritual experience is difficult to describe verbally, people who are on the path of spiritual development can be distinguished from others. These people, as a rule, are more peaceful, humbler, more patient. They have more love, compassion, and the ability to accept the other's point of view [9].

Discussion and Conclusion. Historically, 'Abrahamic religions' such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism have been an ethno-integrating force in the formation of the North Caucasian peoples. These religions have helped to preserve the national cultures and national identity of the North Caucasian peoples throughout the centuries of their existence in the region. Muslim, Christian and Jewish clergy are aware of their role and responsibility in maintaining peace and tranquillity in our multi-ethnic, multiconfessional and multicultural region, guiding people towards peaceful relations between different peoples and religions and strengthening the common homeland of Russia.

The people of Dagestan speak 50 different languages and dialects and traditionally practise three world religions: Islam, Orthodox Christianity and Judaism.

The religion of Islam has given Dagestanis access to the spiritual values not only of the Muslim region, but also of ancient and generally European culture. The mystical branch of Islam, Sufism, is the preferred religion in the region. This is due to several circumstances, the most decisive of which is the following: the Sufi variety of Muslimism, which later

became traditional for the region, had the greatest adaptation resource to natural-climatic, ethnopsychological and cultural conditions of life of local ethnic groups [10, p. 35].

At the same time, there have been and still are negative phenomena in the religious environment of Dagestan, such as the penetration and spread of religious and political ideology, which has staked on inciting religious discord and confessional intolerance, and on undermining public security and stability in Dagestan society. Without becoming a factor of inter-ethnic consolidation and integration between the various currents of Islam at the regional level, Islam is not yet an effective means of intra-ethnic and social consolidation.

Islam, used by various political forces to a greater extent, remains a factor of intra-Muslim confrontation rather than unity. The issue of contradictions between Muslims themselves in the region is again becoming more acute than the problem of interconfessional confrontation. So, there can be no talk of a 'clash of civilisations' according to S. Huntington. Nevertheless, speaking about the limited role of Islam in bringing order to society and making it stable, it should be noted that religion still has a certain potential. Partial application of Sharia law can contribute to this.

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