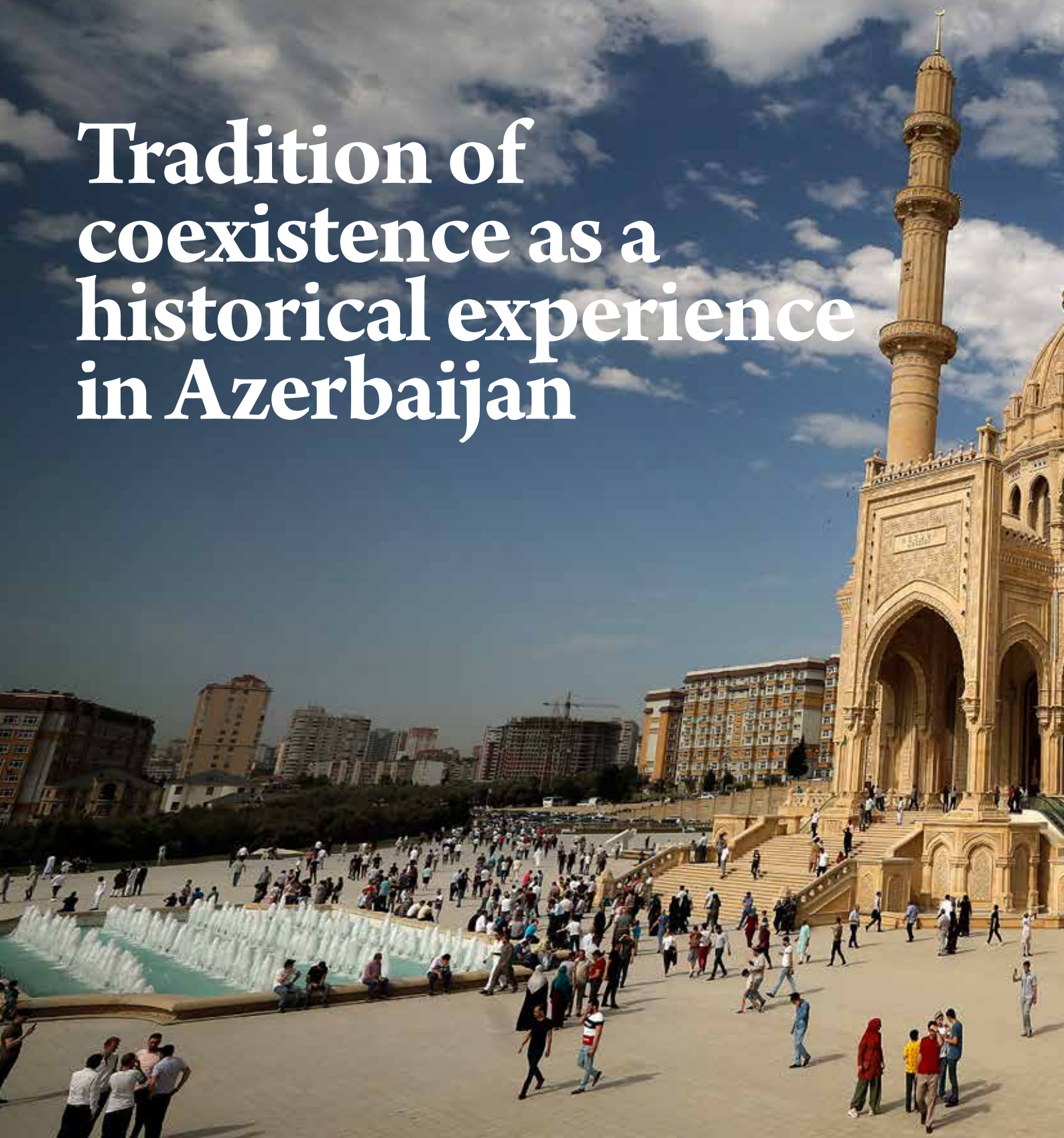


By Agil SHIRINOV,  
*PhD in Theology,  
Rector of the Azerbaijan Theological Institute*

# Tradition of coexistence as a historical experience in Azerbaijan





*Representatives of different religious confessions of Azerbaijan at one table*



Having evolved into a global village, our world needs the alliance of cultures and the development of the tradition of coexistence more than ever before. Unfortunately, in the 21st century world, there are many elements that may pose a threat to this tradition. The existence and activities of numerous groups in the Islamic East advocating radical ideas that contradict traditional Islamic values, as well as the presence and activities of ultra-nationalist, xenophobic and Islamophobic movements that are quite sizable in the Western world, give cause for concern. It is beyond doubt that the factors feeding groups that base their activities not on the alliance of cultures but on their differences go beyond being purely religious and theoretical. Socio-political factors, economic inequalities in societies and many other reasons also factor into the radicalization of people. With regard to specific religious factors, it is possible to say, especially with respect to the Muslim world, that groups differing from the traditional tolerant religious thought based on mystical values that existed in the Middle Ages, adopting a literal approach

*Representatives of Jewish and Christian clergy leaving a mosque in Baku*



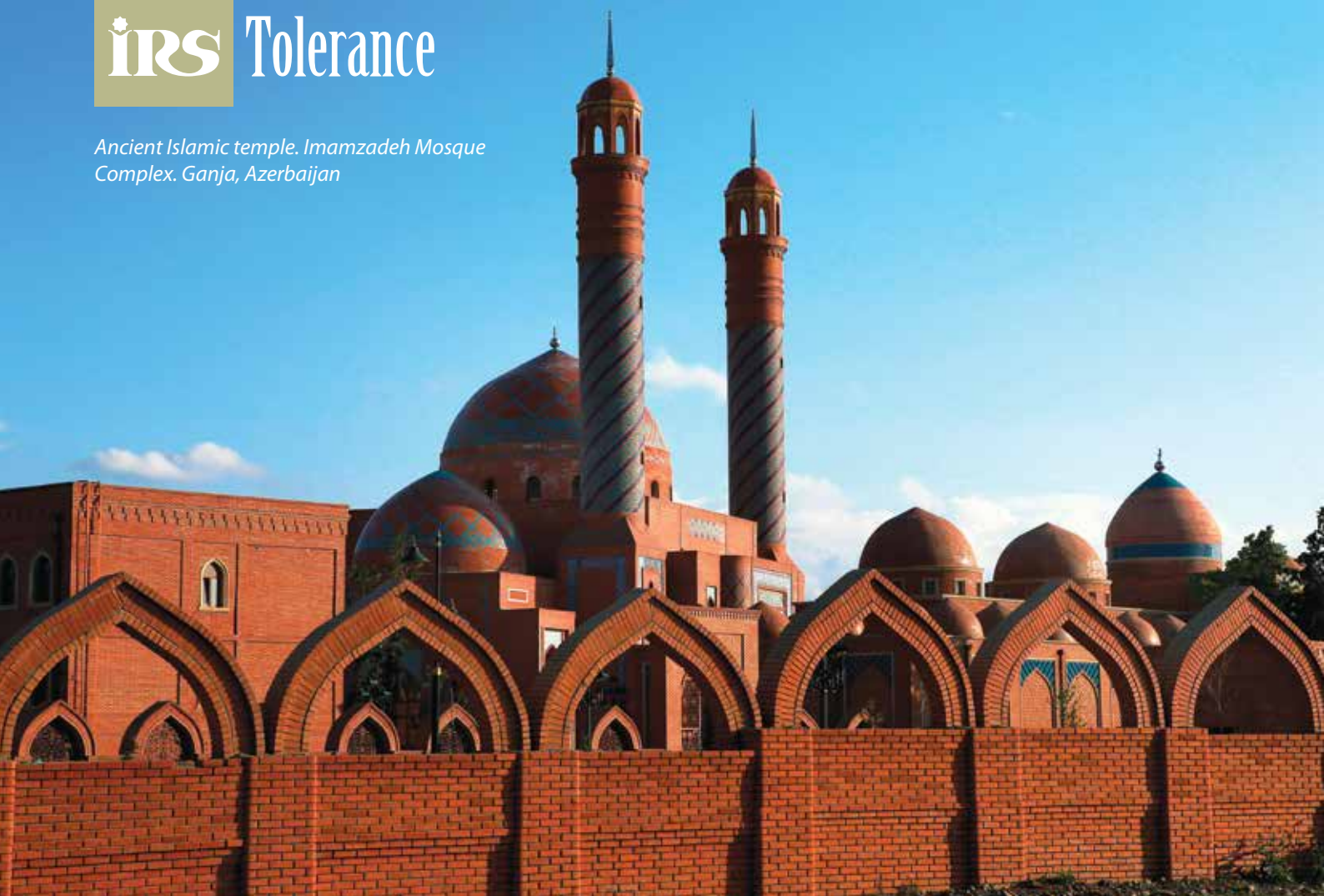
*Leaders of Azerbaijan's religious communities meet quite often*

to religious texts and trying to turn them into the basis of their intolerance against others by taking them out of context, are gradually increasing their sphere of influence. To prevent this, it is of great importance to present and propagate the traditional universal values of religion in a way that appeals to the thinking of modern man. Muslim theologians and religious figures have a great responsibility in this, and there is a need for the voices of supporters of intercultural alliance, not radicals, to be heard more.

It should be noted that the tradition of coexistence based on multicultural values that has historically evolved in Azerbaijan can make a positive contribution to addressing the problems the world is facing today. Azerbaijan has historically been a place where different religions and cultures converged. Throughout history, it has been a place where major religions of the world such as Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam have taken root. This situation continues to this day. Currently, representatives of three Abrahamic religions live together in Azerbaijan and do not experience any problems on a social level. Undoubtedly, there

are a number of objective reasons for this. These reasons can be summarized under three main headings. The first of these is that the social structure of the Azerbaijani people is not prone to extremism. Well-known geographer Yaqut al-Hamawi, who lived in the 12-13th centuries, mentioned in his famous work "Mujamul-buldan" that even back then the Azerbaijani population was moderate in nature. Indeed, the Azerbaijani people always have been far from extreme tendencies. It is no coincidence that, both in the past and in the present, representatives of different religions and nationalities have lived in Azerbaijan like one family. Let us substantiate this idea with a concrete fact. In the Gabala district of Azerbaijan, there is a settlement called Nij, where a community of ethnic Udi live. In addition to being a distinct ethnic group, the Udi are also the spiritual successors of the Caucasian-Albanian Church, one of the oldest Christian churches in the world. In Gabala, with its population almost entirely Muslim, Christian Udi make up the majority of the population of this settlement. Although they have lived among a Muslim majority for centuries, throughout history, the

*Ancient Islamic temple. Imamzadeh Mosque Complex. Ganja, Azerbaijan*



Udi have not been subjected to any discrimination on ethnic or religious grounds. Today, Muslims also live in the Nij settlement along with the Udi, as representatives of both confessions participate in each other's religious holidays and live in a friendly atmosphere. In another region of Azerbaijan, Guba district, in a settlement called Girmizi Gasaba (Red Settlement), a community of Mountain Jews has also lived freely throughout history in accordance with their religion. It is possible to cite many more of such examples. All this shows that our country has a social structure that is far from extremism.

One of the reasons that has paved the way for the peaceful coexistence of the Jewish and Christian communities with Muslims in Azerbaijan was the respect of Islam, the religion of the vast majority of the country, towards other religions. When we look at both the Holy Quran and the hadiths of Prophet Muhammad, we see that these two main sources of religion reflect a tolerant attitude towards people of other religions and reject intolerance, which is viewed as the main indicator of radicalism. For example, the Quran presents the Islamic community as a "moderate community" (Al-Baqarah, 143). The moderate community is a community that is

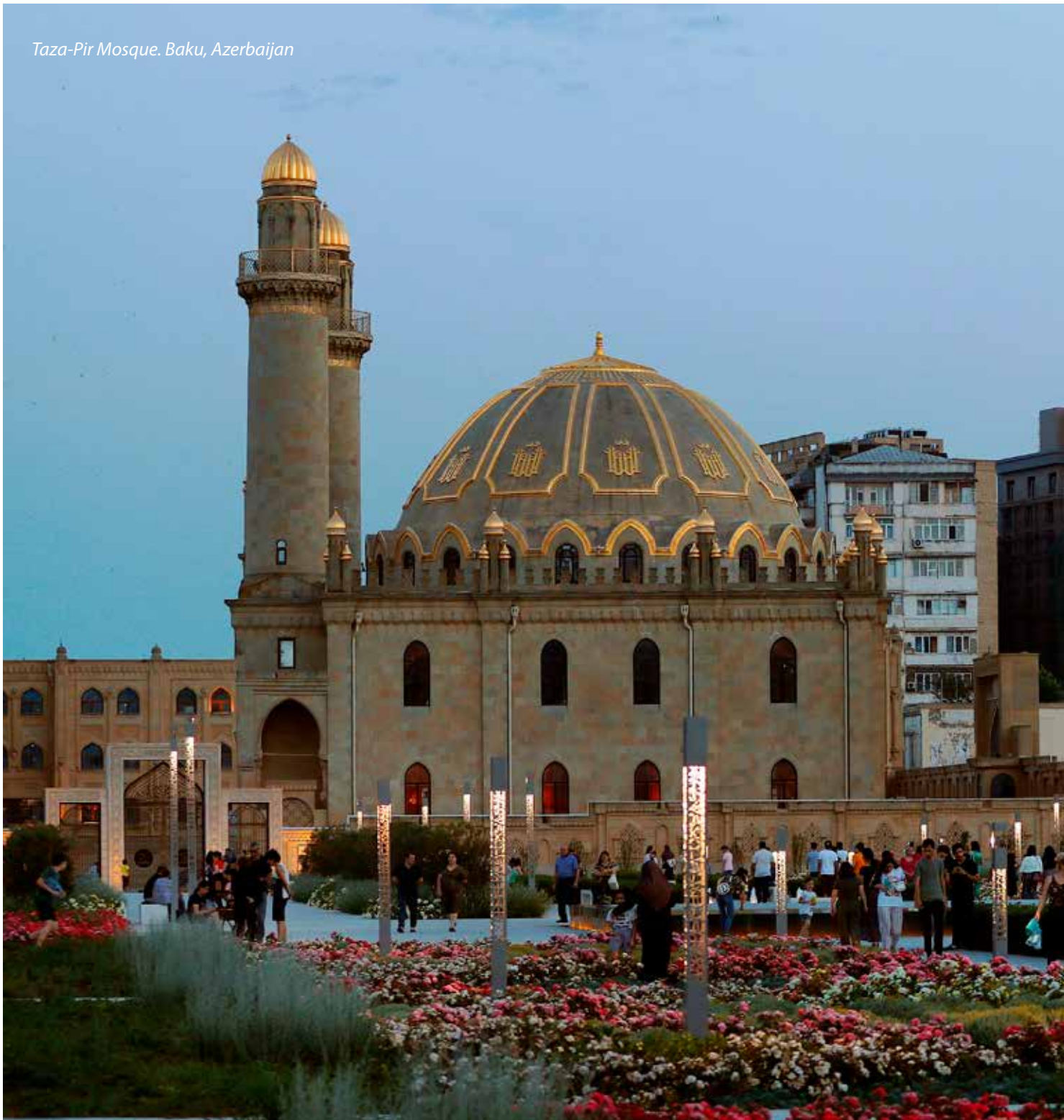
far from all extreme tendencies. At the same time, the Quran negatively treats the ideas of forcing people to adopt the commandments of religion and forcing people to accept their religion by force, which represent the main characteristics of radical movements. The verses "There is no compulsion in religion" (Al-Baqarah, 256) and "Your religion is for you and my religion is for me" (Al-Kafirun, 6) are the most obvious examples of this. In the small city-state that the Prophet established in Medina, Jews and even pagans who did not touch Muslims had the right to practice their religion freely. The Prophet allowed a delegation of Christians from Najran to worship in the Prophet's Mosque. The following historical fact, narrated in historical sources, reflects Islam's tolerance of other religions.

According to sources, one day, while Prophet Muhammad was sitting with some of his companions, a funeral procession approached them. As the procession passed by, the Prophet stood up as a sign of respect. Those around him said, "Oh Messenger of God, this is a Jewish funeral." He said, "Isn't he a human?" In this context, the advice given by the Prophet to Malik Ashtar, whom Imam Ali, the son-in-law and cousin, sent as

*The words of the Holy Quran, the last of the heavenly books, have been read with reverence in this holy land for centuries*



*Taza-Pir Mosque. Baku, Azerbaijan*



governor of Egypt, is also very meaningful. He said to Malik, "People are of two types. Some are your brothers in religion, that is, Muslims, and others are your fellow human beings." These words may seem ordinary to people living in the 21st century. However, if we consider

that these were said about fourteen hundred years ago, at a time when humanity was still living under the system of slavery, then it becomes clear how valuable these ideas are.

Azerbaijan's model of coexistence has historically



been exemplary not only in interreligious and intercultural relations, but also in inter-sectarian ties within Islam. Sects are a reality of the Islamic world. It is also a fact that inter-sectarian relations have not always developed in a positive direction, and due to political and

social reasons, enmity has been created between sects in some Muslim countries. Even today, we are watching sectarian strife in many regions of the Muslim world. Azerbaijan is an exemplary country of the Muslim world in this respect. Although members of the two major

*Azerbaijan, a crossroads of modernity and tradition, is also a point of convergence of different cultures*



sects of Islam have lived in our country throughout history, negative situations on sectarian grounds have never occurred between them. Especially in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Azerbaijani intellectuals undertook activities, both intellectually and practically, to eliminate sectarian divide in the Muslim world. Among them, it is necessary to specifically mention such thinkers as Sheikh Ismail Shirvani, Seyyid Azim Shirvani, Mir Hamza Nigari, Mirza Aliakbar Sabir, Ali Bey Huseynzade, Ahmed Bey Aghaoglu. It is no coincidence that one of the first to initiate a project of supra-sectarian interpretation in the Muslim world was Azerbaijani Mir Muhammad Karim Bakuvi. The interpretation entitled "Kashful-haqaiq" written by this scholar contains the views of both Sunni and Shiite sects in a way that is far from biased.

As has been the case throughout history, representatives of both sects live in brotherhood in Azerbaijan today. For example, in the Heydar Mosque in Baku, the largest mosque in Azerbaijan, Friday prayers are performed every week by representatives of one of the two major Islamic sects, and representatives of both sects pray behind the same imam, regardless of their sect; one

week, members of both sects pray together behind a Shiite imam and the next week, behind a Sunni imam. This situation is repeated in daily prayers. It should be noted that this is a unique situation in the Muslim world. Thus, in various Muslim countries, it is sometimes possible to find examples of praying together with the call of religious figures of both sects in order to improve inter-sectarian relations and ensure unity among Muslims, but



*Divine service in a synagogue, Baku*

*Kazim Garabekir Pasha Mosque.  
Nakhchivan, Azerbaijan*



it is rare for this to be implemented in the same mosque on a regular basis. In this regard, the model applied in Azerbaijan is one that the Islamic world needs today.

It should be noted that Azerbaijan was also one of the centers of the Sufi tradition, which was a guarantee of tolerance and coexistence in the Caucasus. Thus, Azerbaijan was the center of the Khalvatiya sect, which played an important role in the religious life not only of the Caucasus, but also many regions of the Muslim world, including the Ottoman Empire. The main figure who systematized the sect and ensured its emergence, Seyid Yahya Bakuvi Shirvani, lived and created it in Azerbaijan. The main mentor who determined the religious-mystical world of the Muslim population of the entire North Caucasus region starting from the 19th century was the Azerbaijani Sheikh Ismail Shirvani (Kurdemiri). This Sufi thinker played an important role in the formation of a social structure based on tolerance in the entire Caucasus. Shirvani, who spread Sufism in the Caucasus through his students, played a special role in the continuation of inter-sectarian relations in the region on a positive course. His student, Mir Hamza Nigari from Karabakh, went even further than his teacher in his

views on inter-sectarian relations, laying the foundation for a tradition of mysticism that combined the values of both sects, especially in the Karabakh and Gazakh-Borchali regions.

This tradition of Sheikh Ismail Shirvani has spread not only in Azerbaijan, but also among all Caucasian Muslims, and thus has made a great contribution to the Muslim peoples of the region uniting around the same tradition and establishing positive relations with each other, as well as to their tolerant approach towards people of other religions.

One of the main reasons for the success of the Azerbaijani model, which ensures the smooth coexistence of different religious groups, is the secular structure of the Azerbaijani state and the state's equal attitude towards all religions and sects existing on the territory of the country. The principle of legal secularism in Azerbaijan has been adopted since the time of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, which was established in 1918 and was the first democratic state in the Muslim East. The Republic of Azerbaijan, which regained its independence in 1991, has also adopted this principle and has not taken any religious worldview as a basis for state administration. At the

*Synagogue of Ashkenazi and Georgian Jews. Baku, Azerbaijan*



same time, it has ensured that people can freely practice their religion. The state also supports religious communities in solving the problems they face. Many mosques, churches, and synagogues destroyed during the Soviet era have been repaired by the state, some have been rebuilt and made available to believers.

In Azerbaijan, the relations between the state and religion are regulated by the principle of secularism, but the principle of secularism applied in Azerbaijan is not an exclusivist concept of secularism that aims to isolate religion from the life of society. This is best expressed in the words of Heydar Aliyev, "Our state is a secular state. However, we are not separate from religion." Today, the state is paying special attention to the revival of the Islamic tradition that suffered a blow during the Soviet era in Azerbaijan. Suffice it to note that while 18 mosques operated in Azerbaijan when we gained our independence, today we have more than two thousand mosques, and the restoration of many of these places of worship was carried out by the state. In our country, the state provides financial support for both the restoration of destroyed religious monuments and the construction of new religious places of worship. Important places of worship such as the Bibi Heybat, Tazapir, Ajdarbay, Shamakhi

mosques, the Ganja Imamzada complex, and mosques and temples destroyed by Armenians in Karabakh have been restored with state funds. Many places of worship, including the Heydar Mosque, have been built.

As a result, it is possible to note that the historical tradition of coexistence in Azerbaijan is one of the exemplary models in the world, and this model is being successfully developed in modern Azerbaijan. 🌟

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*St. John the Evangelist Lutheran Church.  
Goygol, Azerbaijan*



*Holy Myrrhbearers Main Cathedral Orthodox Church. Baku, Azerbaijan*