

---

# ISLAMIC IDENTITY OF THE RUSSIAN NORTH CAUCASUS MODERN CHALLENGES

**Ruslan Viktorovich Borisov\***, **Naida Shamilevna Akaeva** and  
**Nurzhagan Nurbagandovna Kazieva**

*FGBOU VO Dagestan State University, M. Gadzhiyev St., bld. 43-a, Makhachkala, 367002,  
Republic of Dagestan, Russia*

(Received 16 October 2015, revised 28 December 2015)

---

## **Abstract**

The article presents the understanding of religious identity phenomenon from the socio-psychological perspective, as well as an attempt to study religious identity types using a set of tools, created by one of the authors. The article analyses Islamic identity state in the present-day North Caucasus and reveals the social factors of development of the negative trends of Islamic identity in self-consciousness of modern Dagestan youth. The article presents the need for the normal formation of Islamic identity, as a result of such development Islam will never be a threat to the Russian and world society. The article shows the results of the study of the Islamic identity of the Dagestan youth and is based on a research conducted in 2014-2015. Religiosity has been studied in two main areas: religious consciousness and religious behaviour. These studies have demonstrated that the process of actualization of Islamic identity is extremely active in Dagestan. But despite the increase in the number of mosques, higher and secondary Muslim schools, religious parties and organizations, literature and other promotional means, the level of culture of young people religious consciousness remains extremely low, which on the background of a socio-economic crisis and political situation creates a favourable environment for protest movement, expressed in the form of religious extremism (Wahhabism). The study involved representatives of the most numerous ethnic groups of Dagestan: Avars, Dargins, Lezgians, Kumyks and Laks.

*Keywords:* identity, Islam, Islamic identity, North Caucasus, Russia

---

## **1. Introduction**

### ***1.1. Theoretical and conceptual understanding of the concept 'religious identity'***

In modern science there is a perception that the ethnic identity is being replaced by the religious identity due to the 'return' of religion in society after disappearance of USSR ideology [1]. Religion is included in the global order not so much as an institution, but as a form of collective or individual identity [2].

---

\*E-mail: borisovr@list.ru

Accumulating the spiritual, religious, socio-cultural and politico-institutional elements, religious identity creates the area for dialogue between groups and communities whose ethnic-religious orientation “as the rays, refracting through the lens, do not converge in a single point” [3].

The state of religiosity is the most common basic characteristic of religious identity (starting from a person and a small group up to society as a whole). Understanding the religious structure of the population, the orientation, the nature and intensity of the activity of religious organizations, the associations of the faithful, and their impact on the surrounding social environment – all of this contributes to revealing the religious identity. This approach allows carrying out a more realistic assessment of the state of religious identity, which is quite contradictory and ambiguous. According to Z.T. Toschenko identification of people with a certain religion in any society is a controversial process, in life it can change from time to time, sometimes even at a very short interval, under the influence of the environment, social atmosphere, life circumstances, ideological influence [4]. Therefore, religious identity can be determined through a whole range of attitudes towards religion: starting from religiosity (that can be of different forms of intensity), through doubts in the faith (uncertain attitude towards religion, indifference) – up to disbelief and atheism.

The following feature, revealed by the sociologists, complicates the opinion on religious identity: the number of people claiming their religious affiliation is significantly greater than the number of those who consider themselves religious people.

In other words, the number of those who consider themselves Muslims and Orthodox Christians is greater than the number of believers in Allah or Christ. According to some studies, this gap reaches 20% [4]. Therefore, it is obvious that in this case religious identity is characterized not only by confession, but on the basis of self-identification as being a part of a group with a particular culture, the national way of life, to a great extent, formed under the influence of the religion. Under the influence of the changed situation, along with the true believers, appeared another ‘adjoined’ category of people, who identify themselves as believers under the influence of social fashion. The word ‘atheist’ is now becoming indecent and atheism is cleansed of those who considered themselves to be atheist. This is mostly due to conformist considerations.

I.A. Ilyin wrote: “The persecution in all cases and under all provisions would undermine and weaken the most haunting power, because it tempers unruly people, creating enemies, and demoralizing submissive people, creating slaves. It is absurd to build the church on enemies and slaves. It would be destructive to establish the state on hostile and slave legal consciousness. An enemy is an eternal saboteur, and the slave is a ready traitor...” [5] Indeed, radical forms of contemporary religious extremism are manifestations of spiritual heteronomy, i.e. blind and passive obedience of one person to another in his/her contemplation and deeds. The ideological choice should be the result of free will and autonomous conscience.

At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the religious factor rapidly penetrated and manifested itself in all areas of Russian society. The scientists called the stunning growth of confessional component in the identity of a person and its powerful impact on the socio-political processes in the country – ‘religious boom’ [6].

Religion in Russia plays an important role, especially among the Muslim ethnic groups [7]. However, the political significance of Islam is expressed not only in the religious narrow sense, but as a determining cultural factor. Such confirmation can be found in the Russian regions with predominance in the Muslim population – especially on the examples of the North Caucasus and the Volga-Ural region, where in the late 1980s – early 1990s religious (Islamic) identity was so politically important that in the forefront of democratic changes it quickly transformed into a form of determination of political subjectivity. In many respects it became possible in the context of ideological vacuum caused, on the one hand, by disappearance of the communist ideology, but on the other hand – by the decline of traditional Islam [8]. During this period “the Islamic discourse replaced dogmas and rituality of the communist” [9].

### ***1.2. The state of modern Islamic identity in the North Caucasus***

In the formation of modern national and civil identity of residents of the North Caucasus it becomes essential to determine one’s own religious and ethnic identity. Many basic principles and requirements of the organized national movement are based on fundamental values and stereotypes of national identity, developed and entrenched in the representation of the North Caucasus population, justified in a certain scientific or mythological way. This is the sum of those definitions that allow to answer the question ‘Who are we?’ in the context of the political structure of the Russian Federation, the Caucasus history and the history of human civilization [3].

As modern society becomes anonymous, there is an increase in people’s demand for association and communication with each other. This requirement highlights the ethno-cultural or religious-fundamentalist community, based on the unity of faith [10]. At critical moments in his/her life a person searches and often finds comfort (real or illusory) in religion, which can allow him/her to overcome emotional conflicts and satisfy some non-religious needs [11].

In most Muslim North Caucasus republics new fundamentalist interpretation of Islam has a significant impact on formation and content of the identity matrix of a person, which is always, “as a dynamic structure, open to new self-identifications” [12]. According to H.V. Dzutsev, who conducted ethno-sociological studies in 7 republics of the North Caucasus Federal District (NCFD) in 2006, the goal of the ideologues of Islamic fundamentalism, the development of which was made possible as a result of socio-economic and political instability in the region, is that Islamic teaching has become dominant in all spheres of socio-political life of the population of the North Caucasus Federal District of the Russian Federation [9, p. 126]. Radical politicization of

the meanings of personal identification can destroy the old consolidation of communities, the core of which was a cultural-value matrix that ensured the development of a stable social group of people for centuries.

In this regard, it should be said that religious fundamentalism of any kind (Islamic, Christian, Jewish, etc.) is universalistic in nature. When Habermas wrote that “fundamentalist attitude is incompatible with the mentality that needs to be shared by a lot of people so that the democratic community has not collapsed”, the author said about all the “religious citizens of the liberal state” [13].

The results of recent sociological studies show that the vast majority from among the believing youth of the North Caucasus are primarily concerned with issues of social justice and the growth of social inequality [14].

In the past two decades the structure of the North Caucasus republics’ confessional area has significantly changed. In the early 90s it was represented by three traditional religious confessions in the region. In the early twenty-first century in the North Caucasus there were more than twenty religious confessions, denominations, and religious movements [6].

A lot of sectarian and religious literature has recently appeared, preaching pan-Islamism, pan-Arabism and separatism ideas, alien to the North Caucasus population. Increased pre-Turkic ambitions of Turkey, claims of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iran, political calculations of Pakistan and Afghan forces are promoted under the mask of spiritual rebirth. Such a condition cannot but influence the church and mosque ideology, which primarily affect youth consciousness. The current stage of social development requires new arguments and explanations of religious outlook. It is necessary to study the content of religious consciousness and ideas of participants who are willing to overcome the socio-economic crisis under religious slogans, fighting for the unity of each republic of the North Caucasus, concerned about the fate of its people [15].

For a correct understanding of modern features of religion in the life of the Dagestan society it is necessary to take into account that in the minds of believers the ideas of social and political nature are now prevailing. It often happens that members of religious organizations, taking into account the mood of believers, prefer to preach sermons that obviously mitigate certain political and social problems.

## **2. Method**

### ***2.1. The study of causes of the spread of radical Islam in the North Caucasus republics***

The confrontation between traditional Islam and the Islamists in Russia has become ubiquitous. In addition to the North Caucasus, where it takes the most extreme forms, up to the form of armed clashes, it is noted in Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Astrakhan, Volgograd and some other areas [16]. In this regard, A. Capeller notes that political interests may be more important than

confessional unity, as evidenced by the conflicts between Muslim Bashkirs and Volga Tatars. General Islam also managed to overcome nationalistic interests of ethnic groups in Dagestan [15, p. 10-22]. According to a research conducted in 2009 by the sociological group of the North Caucasian Academy of Civil Service (NKACS), a survey of about 1,500 respondents in 12 regions of the Southern Federal District (FD), the total loading of background identification of the religious factor in Russian-speaking regions of the Southern Federal District and in the national republics does not exceed 10%. Its value in the Republic of Dagestan (18.8%) and the Republic of Ingushetia (14.2%) is significantly higher. But the religious factor is not yet acting as the top priority there [17]. However, the problem of competing ethnic and religious identities in the North Caucasus, where appropriate studies are being conducted with varying degrees of intensity, have not been fully reflected by the scientific community. Despite the fact that several constructs have been developed in the region, that allow for the study of different types or levels of group identities based on multi-paradigmatic character, as reported by V.V. Chernous, full monitoring of the transformation of social identities of the peoples of the North Caucasus have not emerged. Due to the lack of appropriate representative and relevant research, many representations, including expert, analytical and scientific levels of the dynamics of the processes of identification and differentiation among the peoples of the North Caucasus regions of Russia and in the territory of the Southern Federal District are speculative to a certain extent [18]. Although the Islamic Renaissance could fill the ideological vacuum for millions of people who had been looking for valuable support, social and political orientation in a complex era of change [8].

Problems of construction of collective identities in such a complex organism that is a poly-ethnic and multi-confessional country – the Russian Federation, no doubt, in the coming years will maintain their special urgency. In our view, religion in general and Islam in particular, has gained such popularity due to the lack of clear ideology in Dagestan society. We can often observe that such zealous adherence to Islamic canons in the Northern Caucasus is caused by fashion statement, not a desire to live, think and behave in accordance with these requirements.

In any case, at the societal level Islamization of society is expressed in all the more evident popularity of religious ritual: increasing the number of Islamic weddings, celebrating Islamic holidays, wearing hijab and so on. An important role is played by the Islamic business that has found its niche in the new economic conditions. Production of Islamic clothing, Islamic clothing shops, religious objects, the introduction of Islamic fashion find a lot of consumers, also among not religious young people, who are ready to follow traditional designs, especially if it is promoted in society. Hijabs are becoming more spread as popular clothing marking affiliation to Islam. Islamic education became the most important element attracting public attention to religion. In Dagestan during the last decade we can see people who applied to the gushing stream of literature quite indiscriminately, including many works of radicals and obtaining

grants for education. The countries where radical Islam is cultivated provided an opportunity for young Dagestanis to get a free spiritual education. Then after having received diplomas, they came to Dagestan and began to preach in the appropriate spirit they got during studies. It is not surprising that the government is extremely wary of such volunteers. At the household level, the processes of re-Islamization are even more noticeable. They allow us to conclude that in the future the influence of political Islam will be expanded; there will be new forms of its cooperation with the secular power in Dagestan.

## ***2.2. Methodology of Islamic identity study***

Opinion polls show that more young people especially in the villages of Dagestan identify themselves as Muslims and only then as citizens of Russia [19]. There are changes on the linguistic level. For example, in Dagestan, the Muslim holy month has long been called Ramazan, but in recent years they began to call it Ramadan more often, which probably can be explained by 'fashionable' trends of the Arab East, where this month in the Roman alphabet is written like Ramadan. In addition, during this month you can often see frequent flickering of phrase Ramadan Mubarak or Ramadan Kareem on the billboards in the country, which in common sense means congratulations on the advent of the holy month. These phrases also have recently arrived in Dagestan from the Arab East, primarily from the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. It is difficult to say whether this is good or bad, but traditional Islam, which has long been practiced in Dagestan, has been recently absorbing more and more innovations, intervening into the republic from the Muslim countries. In the minds of Dagestan Islamic identity is closely linked to ethnic identity. "Religious identity is now largely taking on the features of cultural identity" – notices V.I. Garaja [20]. Religion in the Dagestan society is becoming a significant component of culture and is actualized in the process of self-determination. For many Dagestanis religious identity is considered one of the most important social components. In this case, the specificity is that a representative of the Dagestan people is initially perceived as a Muslim, regardless of his/her level of religiosity. The question of faith is very personal (there is no desire to spread their beliefs on society) in the European countries, but the religious revival of Dagestan has far-reaching consequences.

Studying this perspective, we can conclude that all depends on the social environment, historical or social situation, the policy of the government and the clergy and their interaction, as well as the policy of the central government and its relations with the local authorities. The importance of Islam in the stability of the region in modern conditions is increasing. In contrast to the early and mid-1990s, in the last decade including of religious factor into ethno-political processes in the region is becoming more active. This suggests the formation of a stable Islamic identity and that the religious factor will gradually replace the ethnic vector in the definition of regional development.

In order to identify types of Islamic identity among the youth of Dagestan, we undertook a socio-psychological research. So, following our scientific position that any identity including religious (in this case, Islamic), can be both normal and deformed (hyperpositive or negative – Islamic fanaticism, Islamic narcissism, etc.), we conducted a study by the method of ‘Types of religious (Islamic) identity’ [21]. At this stage of the study, respondents were offered a questioner that consists of 20 statements (5 statements for each type of religious identity), and it was necessary to express the extent of their agreement with the statements from ‘agree’ to ‘disagree’. Depending on the degree of agreement with the statements the respondent received the appropriate amount of points on each of the scales. Then all the scores were summed for each scale to identify the dominant type of religious (Islamic) identity. This study involved 150 people aged from 20 to 25 years and the religious identity of the five most numerous ethnic groups of Dagestan – Avars, Dargin, Laks, Lezgins and Kumyks had been studied. The applied methodology identified the following scale: hyperpositive religious identity – religious narcissism, bordering on religious fanaticism, that is identity, which has the exclusive domination of the interests of religion, often irrationally understood, the willingness to go in the name of them to make any sacrifice and action, the attribution of special place in history and in the modern world to religion. Positive (normal) religious identity is the identity in which a person has a sense of psychological comfort, a sense of satisfaction from self-awareness of one’s own confession. As for this type of religious identity we can talk about religious tolerance. Negative religious identity is the identity, which occurs when there is a low awareness of the status of one’s religion, the recognition of its inferiority to others, a sense of psychological discomfort because of one’s own confession - hence, avoiding the demonstration of their religious affiliation. Atheism is complete denial of God and all religious and divine.

### **3. Results**

During processing the questionnaires we obtained the following results. Hyperpositive religious identity was revealed in 28.2% of the respondents. These are the people who claim to follow the laws of Islam, rather than the state laws of the Russian Federation in their lives, in their actions and behaviour in the first place or to believe that Muslims are much neater and more cultured than members of other religions and also all respondents of this group would prefer to have only Muslims living in Dagestan. 70.4% of respondents were characterized by positive (normal) religious identity. These respondents answered that if in Makhachkala a new large church is built in the centre of the city, they would have reacted to it properly and safely; they also believe that Muslims are people just like everyone else – no better and no worse. We have not revealed negative religious identity in students who participated in the survey. Atheism was detected in 1.4% of the students surveyed. These people believe that God does not exist, it was invented by people, or they just say they do not believe in God.

The results of this phase of the study revealed three main issues, the three major areas of work. Firstly, almost 30% of the students who appeared to have the religious narcissism, bordering on religious fanaticism – it is a figure that makes you think and perhaps worry about it. The growth of this indicator in the future will undoubtedly lead to undesirable processes in the republic. Therefore, in this case, it is necessary to develop serious measures of psychological and socio-pedagogical correction. Secondly, we revealed a normal Islamic identity in the absolute majority of students who participated in the study. However, work is needed here too. It is necessary to confer resistance to this trend, to strengthen and promote the development of a normal, traditional Islam with all sorts of measures. Third, identified by the absolute majority of respondents, normal religious identity is in the process of ranking self-image to the first position, in some cases, sharing this position with ethnic identity. However these types of identity squeeze to the margins civic identity – from our point of view, it is an important construct of stability in the republic. It should be noted that the civil identity should be considered in the context of overcoming the stereotypes of traditional society to a modern supra-ethnic picture of the world, but with absolute respect for the rights of individuals to follow the customs and traditions of their nation and their religion. We believe that every person living in our country should not forget about his/her faith and ethnicity. But he/she must, first of all, be a citizen of the Russian Federation and be proud of it. No one has the right to put ethnic and religious characteristics and laws above the laws of the state. However, the very laws of the state must take into account these features. Indeed, as Islam remains one of the most important factors of the North Caucasus society, there is no reason to expect a weakening of its influence on all aspects of life.

#### **4. Discussion**

As the rich experience of world development shows, a sharp upgrading of traditional society inevitably leads to a dramatic social change in traditional Muslim societies, paving the way for radical protest. The expert community in the bulk is inclined to believe that the primary reasons are that of an internal character, while external influences are secondary, complementary effects. In this regard, a number of political scientists, sociologists and psychologists have very clearly stated the definition of priority reasons for the spread of Islamic extremism. According to the opinion of S. Akimbekov, “the primary process of radicalization of Islamic movements is the depth and the scale of the past changes in a particular society due to modernization. The impact from abroad has a pronounced secondary character... When frustration of a large part of society with the results of modernization, as well as with the activities of the traditional elite, closely linked with ‘ulama’ (collective name of the representatives of the enlightened class in the Islamic society), reaches a certain level, then there are conditions for the emergence of radical movements of supporters of ‘true Islam’ or ‘Wahhabis’ [20, p. 82-83]. Currently, there is a



profound disorder of continuity of social practices, the crisis of Islamic identity of the residents of the North Caucasus from modern Russia. This is an opposition of educated young members of the Muslim Ummah and the so-called 'Babays', or as they are called in the Caucasus, the carriers of 'popular' Islam. The most important reason for the formation of such a caste regards the difficulties of social adaptation and integration of the Muslim Ummah in each locality. For them, social elevators do not work, so people try to find their expression in flows of Salafism. Sharp modernization of the traditional society in the North Caucasus region has led to dramatic social changes within a traditional Muslim Ummah and contributed significantly to the creation of ground for radical Islamic groups. In extreme cases it came to terrorism, which represents a real threat for the society.

Different forms of terrorism are generated by social and personal not being realized, intolerance to any dissent, national oppression. The social base of terrorism contains marginal social group, representatives of the nationalist, separatist, religious movements, disgruntled communities, who do not have equal access to the resources of society. As the experience of world development shows, large-scale modernization in the past inevitably led to social and political conflicts, and now to religious extremism. In the fight against religious extremism the economic and socio-political power, psychological and spiritual practices should be applied.

## **5. Conclusions**

Whatever strategy the state power will elect against Islam – deliberately or involuntarily – it could not ignore it. And is it necessary? Normal, undeformed Islamic identity cannot lead in the future to any threat to society. Normal Islamic identity of the person which will 'peacefully coexist' with normal ethnic and civic identity, not forcing, but only complementing each other, in our opinion, is a goal that should be set and purposefully achieved by both the scientific community and social institutions of the republic; certainly, with the full support of the authorities.

On the one hand, we are witnessing a process of spiritual rebirth (religious renaissance) on the territory of Dagestan, against which new religious and extremist religious and pseudo-religious currents are being revived and created. On the other hand, we are witnessing opposition supporters in different directions in Islam: the so-called traditional Islam and Salafism (so popular among young people of Dagestan). While the initial enthusiasm of the new religion causes the feeling of choosiness, emotional recovery, then over time these feelings are blunted and there comes a stage of personality maladjustment, which often turns into extreme forms of delinquent behaviour. All this poses in front of psychologists and educators a new super-task of creating a culture of religious identity in the structure of self-consciousness. It must be emphasized that the Dagestanis overwhelmingly traditionally preserve ethnic and cultural

particularism, reject extremist ideas and aggressive ways to meet ethnic interests.

In conclusion, we note that the issues raised in this article are questions that require additional understanding and scientific analysis. However, it is certain: the theoretical understanding of the problem, a technique of studying Islamic identity and the results obtained can be used in the study of Islamic identity of all the republics of the North Caucasus. In today's world, referring to the current events, the neglect of religious identity, as well as insufficient attention can seriously affect the evolution of the socio-political situation and lead to a further intensification of negative processes that can take precipitous and irreversible character.

### Acknowledgment

This work was financially supported by the government task No. 2014/33 of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation in the field of scientific activities.

### References

- [1] M.V. Nazukina, *Identity Matrix*, in *Political Identity and Identity Politics*, Vol. 2, *The Identity and the Socio-Political Changes in the XXI Century*, ROSSPEN, Moscow, 2012, 96-97.
- [2] R. Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture*, Sage Publications, London, 1992, 100.
- [3] V. Soloviev, *Free Thought – XXI*, **11-12** (2002) 141-156.
- [4] Z.T. Toschenko, *Religious Identity and Bureaucracy*, in *Religion in the Consciousness of the People (the Religious Factor in the Identification Process)*, M.P. Mchedlov (ed.), Institute of Sociology. Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, 2008, 62-85.
- [5] I.A. Ilyin, *Articles. Lectures. Performances. Reviews (1906-1954)*, Russian Book Cover, Moscow, 2001, 55.
- [6] S.R. Kashaf, *Scientific notes SKAGS*, **4** (2013) 105-116.
- [7] I.G. Kargin, *Sociological Studies*, **5** (2004) 105-116.
- [8] L.V. Sagitova, *Sociological Studies*, **2** (2012) 104-114.
- [9] H.W. Dzutsev, *Ways to Overcome Ethnic and Social Conflicts in the North Caucasus Federal District of the Russian Federation*, ISPR, Moscow, 2010, 76.
- [10] S. Huntington, *Pro et Contra*, **2(2)** (1997) 142-143.
- [11] F.E. Vasilyuk, *Experience of Prayer. Experience of General Psychological Research*, Meaning, Moscow, 2005, 17-23.
- [12] A. Malashenko, *Islam in Russia*, ROSSPEN, Moscow, 2007, 196.
- [13] J. Habermas, *Between Naturalism and Religion. Philosophical Articles*, Russian translation, The World, Moscow, 2011, 9.
- [14] Z.M. Abdulagatov, *Features of Socialization of Modern Youth and Social Strain among Young People*, IIAE DNC RAN, Makhachkala, 2011.
- [15] A. Capeller, *Subnationalism of Nations without a State. In Nationalism in Late and Post-Communist Europe*, ROSSPEN, Moscow, 2013, 45-53.

- [16] S.A. Semedov, *Islam in Politics: The Ideology and Practice*, Ekoninform, Moscow, 2009, 31.
- [17] M.R. Kurbanov and G.M. Kurbanov, *Religions of Dagestan Peoples*, SUE 'Dagestan Publishing House', Mahachkala, 2001, 6-17.
- [18] V.V. Chernous, *Ethno-Confessional Identity of the Peoples of the North Caucasus in the Modern Scientific discourse*, Proc. of the International Scientific-Practical Conference - Identity and Integration: the Experience of Russia and Germany (South of Russia – the North Caucasus), SKAGS, Rostov-on-Don, 2009, 33-39.
- [19] Z.R. Usmanov, *Bulletin of the Dagestan State University*, **4** (2013) 265-267.
- [20] V.I. Garaja, *The Problem of Identity and Tolerance Potential in Developing Russia, in Theory and Practice of Educational Policy in the Context of Modernization of Multi-Ethnic Society*, Part 2, M.N. Kuzmin's Russian Academy of Education, Moscow, 2006, 45.
- [21] S. Akimbekov, *Afghan knot and security issues in Central Asia*, KISI, Almaty, 1998, 280.
- [22] R.V. Borisov and N.S. Akaeva, *Islamovedenie*, **3** (2014) 89-94