



## **The multicultural nature of Azerbaijani space as seen by exponents of Azerbaijani culture\***

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### **Abstract**

*The contribution written by various representatives of Azerbaijani politics and culture, tends to highlight how the Azerbaijan is one of the few countries that symbolizes multiculturalism and multiconfessionality as a tool for dialogue, peace and coexistence. What is particularly important is the knowledge of the model of religious tolerance and secularism that currently Azerbaijan represents, also through the 'conception of seminars and international public conferences on the issue as the "Forum on Intercultural Dialogue". The Forum, founded in 2008, is promoted by UNESCO, the United Nations Alliance of Civilisations, the World Tourism Organisation, the Council of Europe and the Presidency of Azerbaijan.*

**Keywords:** *multiculturalism, religion, tolerance*

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## 1. Cultural relations between Azerbaijan and Italy<sup>1</sup>

Cultural relations between Azerbaijan and Italy had a long history and developed with varying success in different historical periods. The current stage of the Azerbaijani-Italian cultural cooperation covers the period after Azerbaijan gained its independence in 1991.

Italy recognised the independence of the Republic of Azerbaijan on January 1, 1992, in May of that year diplomatic relations between the two states were established. In 1997, Italy for the first time opened its representative office among the South Caucasus republics in Azerbaijan. On September 25 - 28, 1997, President of Azerbaijan Republic, Heydar Aliyev took his first official trip to Italy. As a result of the visit, the President of Azerbaijan signed seven agreements on political, economic, cultural and technical cooperation between the two states. The Azerbaijani Embassy in Italy started operating in 2003.

The stimulus for intensification and further expansion of the Azerbaijani-Italian partnership was the official visit of the Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev to Italy on February 24-26, 2005, during which new agreements were signed between Italy and Azerbaijan in connection with cooperation in the fields of customs, telecommunications, sports, culture, municipality and justice. In subsequent periods, visits were reciprocal.

The current stage of development of interstate relations covers all spheres of cultural interaction. The Strategic Partnership Agreement was signed during the next visit of Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev to Italy (July 15, 2014).

Italian companies take an active part in various sectors of the Azerbaijani economy. A vivid example of close cooperation is also the project of the Southern Gas Corridor, the implementation of which corresponds to the energy strategy of the two states. Italy is one of 11 members of the OSCE Minsk Group, established on March 24, 1992.

Since the second half of the 1990s, there have been tendencies towards mutual cultural cooperation, the main content of which was the presentation of more and reliable information about Azerbaijan, its history and culture, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The activities carried out were limited mainly to musical performances and book exchange.

Among the public organizations that make an essential contribution to the development of ties in the sphere of culture, the Heydar Aliyev Foundation is the first to act as the organizer of a number of important presentations of Azerbaijani culture in Italy, including "The Days of Azerbaijan" dedicated to the 20th anniversary of establishing ties between two countries; participation of Azerbaijan at the Venice Biennale; Opening of the pavilion of Azerbaijan at the World Exhibition "Milan Expo-2015"; Projects on the popularization of Nizami, the restoration of monuments of cultural heritage of Italy.

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<sup>1</sup> This paragraph was written by **Isaxan Valiyev**

A very promising form of cooperation was their regionalisation, expressed in the twin city movement, which has evolved significantly over the past quarter century. The most dynamic and multi-layered links in the field of artistic culture. Very high indicators in the field of literature, where along with the translation aspect, mutual priorities were formed, joint projects were launched — actively developing book exchange, participation in exhibitions. The most significant are the connections in the musical sphere, both classical and popular. Particularly noted was cooperation in the field of classical opera, as well as the synthesis of Azerbaijani-Italian music, creative tandems. Over the past five years, there have been significant changes in the field of cinema. Along with participation in film festivals, agreements on the exchange of educational programs were developed.

The dynamics of the development of ties in the field of fine arts reflect numerous mutual exhibitions, master classes, festivals and long-term projects, such as the popularization of Nizami's creativity, the erection of his monument in Rome, the exhibition "Milan EXPO 2015", the restoration of monuments of Italian culture, the Vatican Catacombs and also, the restoration of the pearl of the Azerbaijani medieval architecture, "Shirvanshah Palace", by the famous restoration company of Italy "Arte e restauro".

Besides, bilateral meetings of representatives of the business community can be mentioned among bilateral cooperation forms: research seminars; International discussion meetings, dedicated to the economy, art business, the creation of international technology exhibitions.

In the list of cultural contacts, a special place belongs to the participation of Azerbaijani artists in the International Biennale, traditionally held in Venice. Azerbaijani artists have already participated in this Biennale three times. At last, held in 2016, the creative work of such artists as Altai Sadykhzade, Mikail Abdurakhmanov, Aidan Salakhova, Khanlar Gasimov, Agha Huseynov and others were presented.

About 40 books about the culture, history and economy of Azerbaijan have been published in Italy in recent years, Of these, 12 were published by the great friend of Azerbaijan, the famous Italian publisher of the Roman publishing house "SandroTeti" and the head of the Roman branch of the Baku International Center of Multiculturalism, Sandro Teti.

In the sphere of creative and educational contacts, a significant event is the signing of a contract on student exchange and the exchange of educational programs between the Azerbaijan State Academy of Arts and the Academy of Fine Arts in Florence.

Cultural exchange between Italy and Azerbaijan has great potential, as both countries have a rich cultural past, embracing both folk forms of culture and professional types of contemporary art.

## 2. Consideration of problems of cultural diversity and national identity in the prism of Italy and Azerbaijan<sup>2</sup>

We will discuss here two important concepts which sometimes one of these covered another one but sometimes reflected as contrast ideas. One of these concepts is cultural diversity which reflected itself reality of every each society (ethnic, religious, sexual, racial etc. characters), which caused to thinking on such questions. What is cultural diversity? What is depending on consideration of cultural diversity in society? Acceptance of cultural diversity as a conception in society could cause degradation of national identity? In prism of these questions, we will try to understand Azerbaijani and Italian model of co-existing. Both of these models based on different considerations - multiculturalism, intercultural and trans-cultural attitudes.

Azerbaijani model of co-existence based on religious, cultural, ethnical and gender values which we can observe this reality in every stage of Azerbaijani history. We know that sometimes Azerbaijani people believed shamanism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. All these religions impact to welfare life of Azerbaijani people. Also, it needs to emphasise that Azerbaijan lives many ethnic groups with together in peace condition in all stage of history. From this perspective, we can say that Azerbaijan was a multicultural society. However, here mainly principle was toleration which based on Holy Scriptures – in Tora, Avesta, Bible and Koran. For example, in Bible is said “With all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love”<sup>3</sup>. This statement is a real challenge for all humanity to love, respect and living together, because, all these challenges serve to harmony and co-existence in society. We can follow the same tendency in Koran, too. In Koran is emphasised: "O mankind! We created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes that you may know and honour each other (not that you should despise one another). Indeed the most honourable of you in the sight of God is the most righteous." <sup>4</sup>. It is possible to follow the same tendency in every holy book, including Avesta and other literary sources which Azerbaijani model toleration and multiculturalism based on these.

We can observe this tendency in every Azerbaijani thinkers` ideas starting from Nizami, Bahmanyar, Suhraverdy, Fuzuli to modern thinkers Abaskulu Bakhtanov, Fatali Akhundov, Uzeyir Hacıbəyov, Nəriman Nərimanov, Abdulla Şaik and others. For example, Nizami expressed that- “Different songs, different scenes, Bring harmony to unite in one place”<sup>5</sup>. Again, Azerbaijan poetry Abdulla Şaik noted “We all are parts of The Sun”<sup>6</sup>. All these statements which we can follow in

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<sup>2</sup> This paragraph was written by **Elsevar Samedov**

<sup>3</sup> The Bible. Ephesians 4:2.

<sup>4</sup> (The Koran, 49:13).

<sup>5</sup> Nizami Gəncəvi. "Xosrow and Shirin" (Trans: Rasul Rza ). Baku: "Writer", 1983, p .368.

<sup>6</sup> Literary Sources of Azerbaijani Multiculturalism \ ed: Kamal Abdulla. Baku "Mutercim", 2015. p. 245.

every work of Azerbaijani thinkers reflected itself harmony and principles of co-existence.

Certainly, all these processes continue as a tradition in recent days in Azerbaijan. It needs emphasise that the 2016 year announced "Year of Multiculturalism" by President of The Republic of Azerbaijan. Also, in 2015 opened Multiculturalism centre in Baku which regulates ethnical and religious relations in the country, moreover propagandise model of Azerbaijani multiculturalism in abroad. Also, organised by International Multiculturalism Centre summer and winter schools which there discussed interfaith and religious issues, the status of ethnic minorities and other multicultural problems. In these schools students from foreign countries who take a course about Azerbaijani model of co-existence in their universities.

Moreover, as we know lives many ethnic groups and religious confessions in Azerbaijan and never occurred any conflicts between them. Because the Azerbaijani model of multiculturalism is not artificial, it is based on profound sources which reflected all spheres of Azerbaijani society. It needs emphasising that live around 30 ethnic groups in Azerbaijan. However, 91% of Azerbaijani population is Turks, 9% of the population is national minorities – Talishs, Kurds, Avars, Tatars, Tats, Udi and etc.

If we talk about religions which 93% of Azerbaijani population is Muslim, 65% of Muslims is Shiite, and 35 % is Sunnite. 3.1% of the population is Christian, around Christian communities there are Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant confessions. Also, in Azerbaijan live many religious minorities – as a Bahai, Zoroastrians, Krishnaitis etc. All these realities reflect of Azerbaijani model of co-existence, which here it is possible to observe the intercultural and trans-cultural process.

If talk about Italy we can say that this beautiful land has been cradle for many historical events from the ancient period to modern epoch. All these periods in Italy have been different co-existence models and its considerations because there are many different religions and ethnic groups which live peace condition. If talk about nowadays, Italy can no longer ignore the history of these religions – the many Christian denominations, Judaism, Islam, the oriental – which have contributed to forging its identity throughout the centuries and animate a present-day characterised by diversity and by continuous exchange and mobility. In 2013, people belonging to non-Catholic religious communities were between 4,343,000 and 6,428,307, Muslims (1,500,000) Orthodox (1,400,000), Evangelicals (650,000), Jehovah's Witnesses (400,000), Hindus (135,000), followed by Protestants, Jewish, Sikh, Mormons e Baha'i (less than 60,000).

If talk about ethnic groups which live in Italy, they are many. It needs to emphasise that as a result of the profound economic and social changes induced by postwar industrialisation, including low birth rates, an ageing population and thus a shrinking workforce, during the 1980s Italy became to attract increasing flows of foreign immigrants. Especially, since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and more recently, the 2004 and 2007 enlargements of the European Union, the main waves of migration came from the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe (mainly from

Romania, Albania, Ukraine and Poland). The second most important area of immigration to Italy has always been neighbouring North Africa (in particular, from Morocco, Egypt and Tunisia), with soaring arrivals as a consequence of the Arab Spring. Furthermore, in recent years, growing migration fluxes from the Far East (notably, China and the Philippines) and Latin America (Ecuador, Peru) have been recorded.

However, we can say that in recent days there are profound problems with immigrants who settled in Italy illegally. Here, relations between nations, religions and immigrants regulated with the ideology of interculturalism. *Intercultural dialogue is a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange or interaction between individuals, groups and organisations with different cultural backgrounds or worldviews. Among its aims are: to develop a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives and practices; to increase participation and the freedom and ability to make choices; to foster equality, and to enhance creative processes.*

If talk about trans-cultural dialogue - *its tackle and reflect on contemporary social issues through multidisciplinary cultural approach create a flexible and sustainable model of culture exchange and mobility between cultural workers and organize an international project of local importance regarding the region* – that today this methodology is prevalent and well-known, used by some societies in the world.

However, there are differences between them, thus Azerbaijani of co-existence based on respect and tolerance that there is no understanding of "I" and "Others", there is only understanding "We". It means that protected here national identity of every each nation. Also, it needs here emphasise that consideration of multiculturalism is not the same with consideration of Western European countries. This model is not only policy of the state, this is either tradition of co-existence. For it, Azerbaijani model of multiculturalism is part of the ideology of Azerbaijanism.

### **3. Azerbaijan-Italian Relations: in Prism of interreligious Dialogue<sup>7</sup>**

This year Azerbaijan celebrates the 25th anniversary of its independence, with understandable satisfaction for the significant progress made in the last quarter of a century, and at the same time with the objective of carrying out structural reforms, functional to the diversification of the economy, conceived as a necessary premise to bring the country into the 'post-oil' scenario that is looming for the years to come. This is a very interesting perspective also for Italy, on the economic level, but also in a wider framework of bilateral relations with a country of ancient culture and traditions, Islamic and with a Shiite majority, and at the same time proudly secular, open to dialogue between cultures, and determined to combat religious radicalism and violent extremism - said the Italian ambassador to Baku Giampaolo Cutillo.

It must be said that recently in Baku was held the forum Italy-Azerbaijan dedicated to the 25th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between two countries. The Forum was very interesting and fruitful.

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<sup>7</sup> This paragraph was written by **Zohra Aliyeva**

This report is dedicated to Italian-Azerbaijani inter-religious relations.

Azerbaijan is a unique example of peaceful coexistence and collaboration. In Azerbaijan, over the centuries the Christian, Jewish and Muslim religions have coexisted and coexist in harmony and mutual respect.

"We believe that people, regardless of their religious affiliation, must respect all other cultures, religions and moral values.

Even those who do not share them or use them or traditions should be tolerant," said Heydar Aliyev.

The roots of this tradition are deeply rooted in history. In the Azerbaijani land, Jewish refugees who fled from the pillage of Judah in the fifth century found refuge. According to historical sources, there were 40,000 (forty thousand) prisoners in Babylon as a result of the looting. In the middle of the 1st (first) century (after Christ) AD Azerbaijan hosted the first Christian followers, founders of the Albanian Autocephalous Church. With the advent of Islam, the religious tradition in our ancient land was strengthened. According to many historians, in the 7th-8th centuries, the Muslims of the Caucasus respected the followers of Judaism, Christianity and Zoroaster. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Azerbaijani constitution enshrines the principle that all faiths are equal before the law in the state-religion relationship. Together with the guarantee of the rights of Muslims (95% of the population is Muslim), the state respects and protects all the traditional religions spread in the republic. The Catholic religion was registered in 1999. In 2002 Pope Paul John II made an official visit to Baku. The number of people who have. He participated in the ceremonies and masses and was far more than expected. Not only Christians but also many Muslims were present to see the Polish Pope. Heydar Aliyev, president of Azerbaijan, said in his meeting with the Pope that the Catholic cathedral had been in Baku until the Bolshevik occupation. It was, therefore, his intention to give a large plot of land for the reconstruction of the church. 'This desire becomes a reality'. Catholics have a beautiful modern church in the heart of the city, with spaces for sports activities.

Azerbaijan is the only eastern country where Catholic churches have been built.

In February of last year, Pope Francis visited our capital. He was received by President Ilham Aliyev and the first lady and first vice-president of the Republic Mehriban Aliyeva. In February our first-lady met the President of the Pontifical Council for Culture, Gianfranco Ravasi, who noted that the cooperation between the Holy See and the Republic of Azerbaijan covers a wide spectrum. The activity of the Heydar Aliyev Foundation concerns, among other things, the Vatican Apostolic Library, where many Azerbaijani manuscripts have been restored. It should be noted that the Cardinal visited Azerbaijan several times and met the different religious communities.

I am aware of the fact that in Italy there is an Islamic Cultural Association, which was formally established as an autonomous body with a public act in 1998. As well as being a place of prayer, the Islamic Cultural Association - headed by Tarek Hassan, an Italian citizen since 1975 - is a point of reference for the community for

the teaching of Islamic religion and Arabic language to children. I think you might be interested to know that in Milan and Florence two Sufist communities exist based on the study of the Azerbaijan scientist and thinker Seyyid Yahya Bakuvi . With the 'intensification of globalisation processes the problem of interreligious dialogue acquires special importance. This dialogue has a long history. Human nature has perceived traditions and religions as ideological enemies, and this can explain the numerous wars have broken out throughout history, including the Crusades. Where is the motivation? Equally important for the formation of strong ties between different ethnic and religious groups in the territory of Azerbaijan and the state. Throughout their history, the peoples of Azerbaijan have often lived under the hegemony of powerful states and common adverse conditions. They have forced them to seek rapprochement, therefore not to value differences in worldview. Generally, the strengthening and expansion of dialogue between religions prevent the development of the so-called "Jealousy of Faiths" that manifests itself with attitudes of superiority' concerning believers of other religions. Our society today is increasingly permeated with humanistic values: openness and tolerance towards different religions cannot be separated from.

However, it is not a simple process. The experience of the past is still alive and, at times, prevents us from collaborating in a more constructive way. We live in a period in which Muslims and Christians develop dialogue by modern and peaceful coexistence. All this does not mean that the faithful of both religions. They should abandon their ethnonational and regional cultures. They should only accept the fact that the world must be more tolerant, more moral.

Tolerance and ethics, two principles that exist in all religions. Emilio Platti, theologian and islamologist, professor in Louvain, in his book "Islam, the natural enemy?" stressed that the call to moral responsibility, the radical fight against injustice is the way to salvation. The law of God, which outlines the way in which..... a common theme for the Psalms and the Koran. Now relations between religions is one of the most significant problems in our world. Different cultures and civilisations soho force them to live together. At the end of the 20th century, Europe ceased to be a mono-religious group because of the presence of Muslims in different European countries. Thus, the coexistence between Christians and Muslims is a topical issue that requires much attention and reflection. Tolerance and mutual respect must serve as the basis for a new model of cooperation. The experience of the recent past shows that the world is based solely on force and is very unstable. One thing is clear: a world without dialogue will never be stable and calm. It is important to find the strength and capacity to develop and maintain respect for other cultures and religions. We should build a new global system on the principle of coexistence and coexistence of different cultures and civilisations. In recent years, we have noticed the numerous attempts to organise a new world order, which has not gone well. One of the reasons for this failure is that these attempts have not sought to ensure the preservation and originality of every member of the world community. By practising hospitality, you can find the truth.



Dialogue is based on the ability to listen to the 'other', to receive the 'other' at home while remaining himself. Second, hospitality is more than tolerance. Dialogue is an encounter, which includes patience and trust. Such meetings can transform us to become more tolerant, remaining the same.

In our opinion interreligious dialogue strengthens tolerance between faiths and contributes to the creation of a culture of dialogue between believers belonging to different religions.

#### **4. On mutual influence between Azerbaijani and Italian philosophy<sup>8</sup>**

In Azerbaijan since 2011 the world Humanitarian Forum on the initiative of Azerbaijan Resident is being held, since 2008 Forum on Dialogue of cultures has been held, in which alongside with scientists of the world, Italian philosophers, sociologists, culture researchers and lawyers take part as well. One can say that they have laid important foundations for interaction and mutual influence between social scientists of our countries. It is sufficient to note that in our forums participated with reports such famous Italian philosophers as Aldo Ferrari, Ca Foscari Venetian University, Gian Franco Poggi, Trento University, Alessandro Vitale, Milan University, Alessandro Figus, an eminent historian Franco Cardini, Roberto de Vita University of Siena etc. As a result of these contacts of our philosophers with Italian ones between the Institute of Philosophy of NASA with Venice and Genoa universities the negotiations on collaboration have been concluded and conferences and seminars held. In particular with Venetian University “Ca Foscari”, at which Azerbaijani and Italian philosophers made reports on subject “Comparative Analysis of comprehending multiculturalism in Azerbaijan and Italy” (September, 2015), as well the international conference at the University of Genoa (May, 2017) on theme “Mediterranean, Black and Caspian seas: 25 years of Italian and Azerbaijani interrelations”. In these conferences and seminars there goes on the improvement of the methods and approaches for the interdisciplinary study of problems of cultural diversity in modern conditions in the epoch of globalisation it is supposed that these works done will be improved in future in the joint projects, publications, etc.

In the Institute of Philosophy of NASA, alongside with investigations on the problems of multiculturalism, in the focus have turned to be the following trends of priority and themes which may be of interest for Italian social scientists, philosophers and sociologists: history of Azerbaijan and world philosophy, philosophy of politics, philosophy of enlightenment and modern. It is natural that we have more directions are, however, we have distinguished those ones, which we consider, present interest for Italian experts. And why so: first the book by G. Reale and D. Antiseri “Western philosophy from origins up nowadays” in 4-volumes, the works by E. Agazzi are well known for us, and in Italy, they are acquainted with our edition “History of Azerbaijani philosophy”. Analysis of these works displays that

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<sup>8</sup> This paragraph was written by **Ilham Mammadzadeh**

history of philosophy of every people supposes comprehension of the ways of involvement of the local national philosophy in world one, and at the same time we cannot help but underline that the authors using sociology, political theory try to avoid reduction of the philosophical text using the modern approaches to preserve philosophical identity. The problems of the significance of the history of philosophy as one part of philosophical identity may become the ground for the joint works. Secondly, Azerbaijani history of philosophy represents a synthesis of the history of Moslem and western philosophy that makes possible the joint investigations of such spheres and themes as the philosophy of medieval Moslem and Western (Italian) peripatetic or, for instance, analysis of politico-philosophical ideas of Nizami and Dante and so on.

Thirdly, the author of these theses has been investigating problems of politics and morals, philosophy and politics, morals and law for many years. These issues are also in the focus of most eminent Italian philosophers, politologists and sociologists famous in the world, for a long time. We know well the famous works by Machiavelli, Pareto and the modern authors N. Bobbio, G. Sartori and others. In particular, we would like to note their works concepts make up an integral part of many courses and specialized courses which we read in our Universities. Our works on the philosophy of Machiavelli's politics are recognised in the world.

All the stated testifies to that between our philosophers the works already have, mutual influence exists that should be extended and deepened. And we have the definite programme of actions with Universities of Venice and Genoa, which we will bring to life.

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