

# Why Young People Turn to Islam in the North Caucasus

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Next to the apartment building I live in, there is a mosque. Ten years ago, when it was still under construction, I walked past it with a good friend of mine, a 70-year-old man who used to work as a principal and was much respected in our little town of Nartkala. "I am going to devote myself to Islam and come to pray in this beautiful mosque as soon as it is finished," he solemnly told me. The construction of the mosque has long since been completed, and my friend is in his eighties now. But he never fulfilled his solemn promise, nor did many other old men in Nartkala. As I watch the mosque sometimes from my window, I notice that mostly young people come to pray here. Many others are asking themselves the same question now: why exactly did we expect that elders would turn to Islam after the demise of Soviet ideology, and not the youth, as it turned out?

Since religion was not popular during the Soviet era, ambitious young men were usually nonreligious. Only older people were known to pray and perform the Islamic duties, which came to be regarded as tradition. Kabardian society, which is firmly based on customs and traditions (Adygha Khabze), started to believe that Islam is a religion of old people. As soon as society regained its religious freedom and the construction of mosques commenced, people generally assumed that the houses of prayer would be occupied by respected old men. But as it turned out, this traditional society was wrong about its own conceptions.

The fact that young people were increasingly turning to Islam became even more striking after a hundred young Kabardian Muslims attacked the headquarters of police and security services in the republic's capital of Nalchik on October 13, 2005. It also brought a pressing question to the surface – what makes these youths turn to Islam and even pushes some to be willing to seal their beliefs with their own death?

I have conducted my research using methods which did not allow the questioning of large groups of respondents. The intended goal was to pinpoint problems rather than to produce their solutions. The information I sought was of such a personal and intimate nature that only people who could trust me completely were prepared to share it with me.

I interviewed my cousins and other relatives, neighbors who have been close to me since my childhood, and my former students. All of these young people were converted to Islam during the last decade; half of them in the past five years. This trend can be considered characteristic of a whole generation. The motivations for young people turning to Islam in the past decade can be grouped into two sets: social and personal incentives.

According to my respondents, conversion can be motivated by the following **social problems**. One of the most important motives is a *lack of national identity*. This particularly concerns urban youth who have spoken Russian all their lives and never learned to fluently speak their native language (Kabardian). The lack of national identity is usually important at the beginning of one's religious path and at the very point of conversion. But after a while, one can see a transformation of this motive as the new believer discovers that Islam calls for more personal feelings than national customs and traditions, and he starts to regard his national identity as a less important issue. He compares national heroes to the Prophet Muhammad and finds them lacking. This usually leads to the discovery of the difference between "pure" Islam, as it was prophesized by Muhammad himself, and later developments or innovations that came to Islam in the centuries that followed, known by young Muslims as *novovvedeniya* in Russian. The next step is acquiring a sense of the difference between "true" believers and "hypocrite" Muslims; those who make this distinction are considered to have become very "devoted" in their faith. They organize themselves into small closed groups that treat others as unbelievers. There are some instances when such "true" believers will not even shake hands with "hypocrites" or will shake hands with "unbelievers" with their fists only, not opening their hands. During the interviews, I specifically asked questions such as "When did you begin to see *novovvedeniya* in Islam? When did you begin to suspect that some Muslims may be 'hypocrites'?" Although few young people reach such an extreme degree of devotion, one can see what the lack of national identity may lead to and how the path of searching for self-identity may bring someone to obtain a "devoted" religious identity.

*Economic problems*, such as unemployment, also played an important role in the conversion of young Muslims. Most of them could not afford things which most young people desire, such as a car, an apartment, clothing, getting married, and a university education. Turning to Islam makes young people more stable in their efforts to earn money; they stay out of risky and unlawful schemes. However, the unemployment problem is easier to solve for people living in the countryside. Because young people in the countryside usually live with their parents and have houses with land, they are taught by their parents to grow fruit and vegetables in their gardens to sell. Such an occupation corresponds to their desire to live an honest and useful life and, in time, it gives them a stable model for living that discourages religious extremes.

*Educational difficulties* are not unrelated to economic problems. Not all schools provide the educational level required for entering a university, and most of the people questioned did not have the resources to pay for further education. This mostly concerns rural people. Ambitious young people without proper education feel dissatisfied with their low social status and often start looking for an informal self-education, such as the kind provided through the study of Islam. Not only does religious study offer these youths a chance to think in new, creative, and empowering ways, it grants them the assurance that they have obtained the only true knowledge in the world.

Educational difficulties are connected with a lack of national identity as well. School

curricula do not contain a clear focus on the national element. This is mostly true for schools in urban areas, where youth do not usually master their mother tongue. Rural youth can compensate for the lack of a national element in their school education by obtaining such knowledge from other sources.

Another very important reason why young people turn to Islam and why some of them are driven to religious extremism is connected to *feelings of protest* regarding the wars in Chechnya and Abkhazia. Interviewees would talk about how they feel insecure living in such an imperfect world, where majorities treat minorities unfairly; in this context, they usually regard Muslims as the important minority. Such feelings of protest usually are connected to the problem of seeking a national identity and the feeling of belonging to a minority. Those who were questioned identified with Chechens as a minority, or as Caucasians, or with Abkhazians as a “close relative nation” and partly as a minority as well. But it is interesting that among hundreds of Kabardian volunteers who have been to Chechnya and Abkhazia, I have never heard of any turning to religion.

There are also feelings of protest with regard to what has been seen as the persecution of Muslims. This issue is particularly important in the context of the tragic events in Nalchik on October 13, 2005, when a hundred young Muslims attacked the headquarters of local police and secret services. Even the officials agreed that those who organized that attack were able to deceive young people and lead them to fight using their feelings of protest against the provocative persecution of Muslims by some members of the local police. Worldwide events such as the wars in Iraq, the events in Palestine, and the scandals about the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad have also caused serious frustration among young people, even if the degree of feeling these have evoked is less than that caused by the persecution of local Muslims.

The other set of motivations are **personal**. One issue closely connected to social problems is the *dissatisfaction of young people with their lives* before turning to religion and the perceived need for critical change. These young people actually have quite high standards of life though they are not able to live at the level of those standards. Respondents felt that their low social status and lack of money drove them to a very bad state: they had bad friends, drank alcohol, and some even used drugs or committed crimes. The lower they sank, the less satisfied they became with themselves, and the more they felt that they did not belong in the place where they had found themselves in life. For example, two respondents exhibited the effect of dissatisfaction with their lives by noting that they had failed to fulfill their life dreams – one of them was a girl who used to dream of becoming a movie actress. In this case, Islam provided a new dream that could replace the previous one.

Another personal motivation is *health*. There is no need to describe at length the negative impact health problems can have, but the important and interesting issue in this case is that turning to Islam may partly solve them. From one perspective, it is obvious that health problems are less important for a Muslim. A believer considers illness to be a punishment for his sins, and the disease becomes a connection between him and God. In other words, he feels physically bad, but he feels spiritually well because of the way in which this illness points to a deeper spiritual state. Additionally, believers often become healthier after turning to Islam because they start to lead a healthier life as they stop drinking alcohol, keep their body clean, and eat properly. The changes in their health are sometimes quite striking if their previous lives had been very unhealthy.

Many young people also have *family problems* that are usually closely related to social problems. If the parents in an urban area come from a village and the children were born in town, there are usually misunderstandings between the generations based on culture, language, identity, and traditional custom. Problems between parents and children often occur concurrently with economic tensions when, by Kabardian tradition, parents are obliged to buy apartments and to educate and to marry off their children. The traditional system considers young people unable to do all that is deemed necessary by themselves, without support from adults, in such an economically unstable society. Such clashes between generations previously seemed insolvable as members of families with such problems would usually become hostile to each other for their entire lives, or young people would simply become drunkards and drug users and end their lives tragically. Now, most young Muslims are able to solve those problems because there is a very highly developed system of ethics in Islam that addresses questions of intergenerational and gender relations. Only a few young people interviewed were married at the time, but one can tell from their words and from general observation that the quality of the couples' relationships usually does not have much influence on the formation of religious tendencies.

At the beginning of my research, I had some presumptions that turned out to be wrong. For example, I assumed that the process of becoming religious would include a very dramatic personal history leading to dissatisfaction with one's life, followed by critical changes in one's character and view of people. But I have met some people that do not fit that theory. Many young people are simply *converted to Islam* by their brothers, sisters, husbands, or other family members. This is particularly true for sisters, younger brothers, and especially wives. Practically all wives became devoted Muslims under the influence of their husbands, and even in cases when the husbands turned away from Islam, their wives usually kept the religion because they felt very safe in the Islamic system of marriage. Those who came to Islam via a positive example usually do not have negative social and personal motivations and do not visibly exhibit any radical feelings. The same kind of positive influence can come from the memory of childhood spent with religious grandfathers and grandmothers.

The main tendency in the North Caucasus today is a turning of young people to Islam. This is a mostly positive trend. Most of the converted become model citizens within their society; they work hard and lead honest lives. But some of the converted young people (though a very small percentage) become extremists. As can be seen, there may be some tendencies toward radicalization present in the very motivation of turning to Islam in modern society (i.e., the lack of national identity, economic and educational problems, and feelings of protest against modern wars). The religious system of Islam is so effective that all of the aforementioned social problems and many personal ones can be addressed and often solved by turning to it. It is not a secret that the modern state is afraid of radical young people and tries to suppress or even to fight them. However, it may be more effective to help the younger generation personally resolve their social problems. Such an attitude would not only prevent radicalization of some young people, but it could develop humanism within the state itself.

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