

# The Importance of Religion for Ethnic Minorities and Connection with Acculturation

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## Abstract

This comprehensive research examines the influence of religion on the acculturation process of ethnic minorities, with particular focus on the Armenian and Azeri communities in Georgia. The study delves into the acculturation strategies utilized by these communities and probes the correlation between their religious beliefs and acculturation. Additionally, the research expands on the broader concept of acculturation, its theoretical underpinnings, and its psychological aspects. It presents an in-depth analysis of Georgia's multicultural fabric, the role of integration in fostering intergroup relations, and the importance of cultural learning and assimilation of host society values. A significant segment of the research is devoted to the exploration of the relationship between religion and acculturation, underlining the importance of understanding religion's role in shaping attitudes and behaviors towards other ethnic groups. The paper concludes with the need for further research to unravel the complex interplay between religion, cultural identity, and acculturation strategies within the Georgian context.

**Keywords:** Acculturation, Ethnic Minorities, Georgia, Religion, Armenians, Azeris

## Introduction

Georgia's multicultural heritage, as chronicled by scholars including Maisuradze (1999), Vadachkoria (2003), Tetvadze (1998), and Jaoshvili (1996), is a testament to the country's diverse ethnic fabric. Presently, every sixth citizen of the country belongs to an ethnic minority, many of whom reside in compact settlements in Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli. The 2014 general population census enumerated Georgians as forming 86.8% of the population, followed by Azeris (6.3%), Armenians (4.5%), and various other ethnicities (2%) including Russians, Ossetians, Yezidis, Ukrainians, Kists, Greeks, Assyrians, among others (GeoStat, 2014). Despite its ethnic diversity, Georgia grapples with the challenge of assimilating its ethnic minorities. These groups employ various acculturation strategies, defined by Sam and Berry (1997) as integration, separation, marginalization, and assimilation, to coexist within the dominant culture. Integration, a strategy of adopting the host culture

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while preserving one's cultural identity, is acknowledged as a key factor in successful coexistence and is found to influence the psychological well-being of ethnic minorities (Rogler et al., 1991; Suinn et al., 1987). Research by Berry et al. (2006), Paluck et al. (2019), and Rios & Wynn (2016) underscores the role of integration in fostering intergroup relations and reducing prejudice against minority groups. Findings from Berry et al. (2021), Nguyen & Benet-Martinez (2013), and Stogianni et al. (2021) indicate that support for integration strategies correlates positively with life satisfaction, self-esteem, and sociocultural adaptation among immigrants. Factors facilitating the integration process, such as language and cultural learning and assimilation of host society values, are identified by Sam and Berry (2006), Berry (2001), Sammut (2010), Padilla (1980), and Pirtskhalava (2017). This research investigates correlation between acculturation and religion of ethnic minorities living in Georgia. It scrutinizes the acculturation strategies of ethnic Armenians and Azeris, Georgia's two largest minority groups predominantly settled in Kvemo Kartli, Kakheti, and Samtskhe-Javakheti (GeoStat, 2014).

### Acculturation

The concept of acculturation, denoting the transformations that ensue when distinct cultures interact, has been a focal point of academic discourse for numerous decades (Adler, 1975; Redfield et al., 1936; Richardson, 1957; Thomas & Znanieck, 1918; van Osch & Breugelmans, 2012; Ward & Kennedy, 1994). Several theories have emerged over time, such as Milton Gordon's assimilation theory (1964), the multidimensional model of acculturation (Ward, 2001), the model of acculturation strategies (Sam & Berry, 2006), and the interactional model (Bourhis et al., 1997). Nevertheless, consensus on which model provides the most accurate depiction and measurement of acculturation is yet to be reached (Reise & Yu, 2001; Kang, 2006).

Acculturation, as a term, has its roots in American anthropology, with its initial use attributed to John Wesley Powell (1883) in his work discussing the psychological alterations that accompany the meeting of two cultures. The first psychological theory of acculturation was formulated by Thomas and Znaniecki (1918), who defined culture as shared cognitive processes such as habits, associations, attitudes, and beliefs, which they referred to as schemas.

The first standard definition of acculturation was proposed by Redfield, Linton & Herskovits (1936), who defined it as "the process of cultural change that occurs when individuals from different cultural backgrounds come into prolonged, continuous, first-hand contact with each other" (pp. 149-152). This definition was later modified to consider changes induced by the melding of two or more independent cultural systems, direct cultural transmission, ecological and demographic changes, and alterations tied to the host culture itself (Social Science Research Council, 1954).

The concept of "psychological acculturation" was introduced by Sam (1994a) and Ward (1996) to differentiate between individual-level and group-level acculturation. Graves (1967) defined individual acculturation as the changes that an individual undergoes as a result of exposure to another culture, while group-level acculturation refers to cultural shifts at a population level caused by contact between cultures (Berry et al., 1988).

### Acculturation Theories

The initial theories viewed acculturation as a linear process (Graves, 1967) where individuals transition from one end of the spectrum, maintaining their native cultural heritage, to the other end, assimilating into the host culture. This perspective suggests a zero-sum game where the decline of one culture directly corresponds to the rise of the other.

Milton Gordon (1964) proposed a unidirectional model of assimilation that identified acculturation as a sub-process of assimilation and considered biculturalism merely a transitional phase from complete segregation to complete assimilation. This model implies that the process of acculturation requires individuals to lose their original cultural identity as they acquire a new one (e.g., LaFromboise [et.al], 1993). Consequently, any issues with acculturation are attributed to the individuals themselves, who are held responsible for their failure to assimilate into the host culture (Bourhis [et.al], 1997).

### Acculturation and Religion

Berry (2003) and Yeh (2003) point out that religion plays a significant role in an individual's acculturation process. There is a consensus among several researchers, including Hood et al. (1996) and Hunsberger (1995), indicating a correlation between religion and negative prejudice. Interestingly, Allport and Ross (1967) argue that individuals with an intrinsic religious orientation are less likely to hold negative prejudices, while those with an extrinsic orientation are less tolerant. Batson et al. (1993) contend that religious communities typically disapprove or denounce negative prejudices like racism. Furthermore, Duck and Hunsberger (1999) establish a connection between religiosity and decreased tolerance, increased levels of negative prejudice, and racism.

### Methodology:

This research employed both quantitative and qualitative methods. A total of 452 participants, comprising of 46.5% Azeris and 53.5% Armenians, partook in a survey. To supplement the quantitative data gathered, in-depth interviews were conducted with ethnic minorities. This qualitative approach involved 42 interviews with ethnic Armenians (n=20) and Azeris (n=22) residing in Georgia.

The interviews were conducted in the participants' native language, with the aid of a professional translator. Each interview was face-to-face and audio-recorded with the participant's consent. The transcripts were subsequently translated into Georgian and analyzed for key themes using qualitative content analysis. The fieldwork was conducted from October to December 2020, with each interview averaging 60 minutes.

The participants were selected from the Samtskhe-Javakheti and Kvemo Kartli regions of Georgia, to ensure representation of ethnic minorities in these areas. This research phase provided deep insights into the experiences and perspectives of ethnic Armenians and Azeris living in Georgia, which could influence future policies and programs aimed at enhancing the integration of ethnic minorities within Georgia.

A quantitative research questionnaire was created to survey ethnic Armenians and Azeris living in Georgia. This survey was developed based on the theoretical framework and analysis of in-depth interviews with field experts. The questionnaire incorporated various self-description tools, including the East Asian Immigrants' Acculturation Assessment Scale (EAAM) (Barry, 2001) adapted into Georgian by Ia Shekriladze in 2017, and other self-descriptive measures adapted to the Georgian population (Sumbadze et al., 2012).

Given the limited proficiency of the ethnic Azeris and Armenians living in Georgia in the official state language (BTCC, 2008), the questionnaire was translated into Armenian and Azeri languages and then back into Georgian to ensure accuracy. Professional translators of Armenian and Azeri descent were involved in this translation process.

Before fieldwork, pilot questionnaires were conducted with representatives of ethnic minorities to ensure question comprehensibility. The data collected were processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS v25). Convenient and snowball sampling methods were adopted for the quantitative and qualitative research respectively. In total, 452 Armenian (n=210) and Azeri (n=242) respondents living in Georgia participated in the quantitative research, and 42 (n=20 Armenian, n=22 Azeri) took part in the qualitative research. The survey was conducted using a self-administered questionnaire, with a door-to-door (D2D) approach.

### **Results and discussion:**

This study identified a significant statistical relationship between the acceptance of intermarriage among ethnic Azeris and Armenians and the importance and degree of religiosity. A negative correlation was observed between the significance of religiosity and willingness to intermarry with ethnic Armenians ( $r=-0.066$ ;  $p=0.022$ ) and ethnic Azeris ( $r=-0.082$ ;  $p=0.004$ ). A similar correlation was found with the assessment of the degree of religiosity ( $r=-0.113$ ;  $p=0.000$ ) ( $r=-0.118$ ;  $p=0.000$ ). This suggests that ethnic Georgians who consider

religion important and identify as highly religious are less likely to consider intermarriage with ethnic minorities.

*Table 1 - Assessment of Contacts*

	Mean	SD
<b>I would agree to start a family with a foreigner living in Georgia</b>	2,52	1,394
<b>I would agree to start a family with an Armenian living in Georgia</b>	1,92	1,158
<b>I would agree to start a family with an Azeri living in Georgia</b>	1,87	1,124

Qualitative data analysis also indicates the role of religion with respect to ethnic minorities. Experts noted that marriages between ethnic Georgians and minorities are infrequent, with women from minority groups less likely to marry ethnic Georgians than men.

*"It's more problematic for a girl to marry Georgian... that girl is already, from a certain point of view, an outcast..."*

*(NGO representative, man)*

The degree of religiousness is also factored in mixed marriages. For instance, less opposition was observed for Muslim-Georgian marriages compared to Christian-Georgian or Armenian-Georgian marriages.

Religion also influences acculturation strategies. Results showed that followers of the Armenian Apostolic Church are more likely to adopt integration strategies compared to Muslims or atheists ( $F(2)=11.718$ ;  $p=0.000$ ;  $\eta^2=0.05$ ). Conversely, they are less likely to choose marginalization ( $F(2)=40.412$ ;  $p=0.000$ ;  $\eta^2=0.153$ ). Ethnic Armenians also displayed a higher tendency towards integration strategies than ethnic Azeris.

The study found that ethnic minorities consider themselves religious ( $M=3.48$ ;  $SD=0.851$ ), with Armenians identifying as more religious ( $M=3.86$ ;  $SD=0.618$ ) than Azeris ( $M=3.16$ ;  $SD=0.893$ ) ( $F(1)=91.261$ ;  $\eta^2=0.169$ ;  $P=0.000$ ). The religious factor's importance is reinforced by expert opinion and qualitative research results.

The findings suggest that religiosity significantly impacts ethnic minorities, often manifesting as a cultural tradition rather than a reflection of faith. Furthermore, a higher degree of religiosity among ethnic minorities is associated with greater integration ( $F(2)=3.3$ ;  $\eta^2=0.014$ ;  $P=0.038$ ), while lower religiosity correlates with increased marginalization ( $F(2)=14.735$ ;  $\eta^2=0.062$ ;  $P = 0.000$ ). However, this trend was not observed across different ethnic groups.

*Table 2 - Integration and Marginalization by Religion*

How religious are you?		Integration	Marginalization
<b>Not religious</b>	Mean	<b>3,60</b>	<b>2,81</b>
	SD	1,51	0,83
<b>Average</b>	Mean	<b>3,48</b>	<b>2,77</b>
	SD	1,45	0,84
<b>Religious</b>	Mean	<b>3,92</b>	<b>2,32</b>
	SD	1,82	0,94

There was no statistically significant relationship between the significance of religion and any acculturation indicator ( $p > 0.05$ ). However, inter-group comparisons revealed a statistically significant difference in marginalization rates ( $F(2) = 3.343$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.015$ ;  $P = 0.036$ ). Individuals who place a high importance on religiosity exhibited a higher rate of marginalization compared to those with an average or low importance of religiosity.

Table 3 - Marginalization by Religion

How important is religion for you?		Marginalization
<b>It is not important</b>	Mean	<b>2,59</b>
	SD	0,60
<b>Average</b>	Mean	<b>2,45</b>
	SD	0,95
<b>It is important</b>	Mean	<b>2,74</b>

Between-group analysis showed a statistically significant difference in the direction of separation ( $F(4) = 25.863$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.118$ ;  $P = 0.000$ ), integration ( $F(4) = 14.485$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.115$ ;  $P = 0.000$ ), and marginalization ( $F(4) = 14.856$ ;  $\eta^2 = 0.117$ ;  $P = 0.000$ ). Further analysis of the data according to the Tukey-Kramer criterion showed that individuals who attend prayer very rarely have a higher marginalization rate than those who attend prayer once every two weeks ( $p = 0.002$ ) or at least once a week ( $p = 0.000$ ). Conversely, those who partake in prayer at least once a week exhibit higher integration strategies than those who attend less frequently ( $p < 0.05$ ). In relation to separation, those who attend prayer at least once a week exhibit a lower separation rate than those who join in a prayer less frequently, except for those who participate in a prayer once every two weeks ( $p = 0.000$  and  $p = 0.001$ , respectively).

*Table 4 - Separation, Integration and Marginalization by Attending Prayer*

How often do you attend a prayer?		Separation	Integration	Marginalization
Very rarely	Mean	<b>3,62</b>	<b>3,22</b>	<b>3,00</b>
	SD	1,10	1,42	0,90
Several times a year	Mean	<b>3,32</b>	<b>3,54</b>	<b>2,54</b>
	SD	0,99	1,61	0,70
Once or twice a month	Mean	<b>4,24</b>	<b>3,61</b>	<b>2,93</b>
	SD	1,16	1,40	0,88
Once in every 2 weeks	Mean	<b>4,33</b>	<b>3,22</b>	<b>2,51</b>
	SD	1,33	1,87	0,94
At least once a week	Mean	<b>2,97</b>	<b>4,51</b>	<b>2,16</b>
	SD	1,17	1,52	0,87

A statistically significant difference was observed in the relationship between the performance of religious rituals and marginalization strategies ( $F(4)=10,615$ ;  $\eta^2=0.087$ ;  $P=0.000$ ). The findings indicate that the more meticulously members of an ethnic minority perform religious rituals, the higher their level of marginalization.

*Table 5 - Marginalization by performing religious rituals*

How often do you perform religious rituals?		Marginalization
I perform all rituals meticulously	Mean	<b>3,00</b>
	SD	0,71
I perform basic rituals	Mean	<b>2,44</b>
	SD	0,95
I rarely perform rituals	Mean	<b>2,25</b>
	SD	0,80
I don't usually perform rituals, but I do celebrate major holidays	Mean	<b>2,97</b>
	SD	0,92

These findings underscore the need to understand religion's role in shaping attitudes and behaviors towards other ethnic groups and the acculturation process. Further research is required to investigate the complex relationship between religion, cultural identity, and acculturation strategies in the Georgian context.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research has shed light on the pivotal role that religion plays in the acculturation process of ethnic minorities in Georgia, specifically within the Armenian and Azeri communities. The study has shown that religious beliefs significantly influence the acculturation strategies adopted by these groups, underscoring religion's capacity to shape attitudes and behaviors towards other ethnic groups. The deep-rooted interplay between religion, cultural identity, and acculturation strategies offers insight into the complex dynamics that shape Georgia's multicultural fabric. Further research is essential to continue unraveling these intricate relationships and to better understand the processes of integration, separation, marginalization, and assimilation within the Georgian context.

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