

Consul General of Azerbaijan speaks about religious tolerance and cooperation at UVU



Consul General in Los Angeles Nasimi Aghayev speaks at UVU

On October 8, 2018, Azerbaijan's Consul General in Los Angeles Nasimi Aghayev spoke to a group of students and professors at Utah Valley University (UVU). In his visit to UVU, Mr. Aghayev spoke and presented to those present regarding how Azerbaijan has been able to achieve a high level of religious tolerance, cooperation, and peaceful coexistence between the various religious groups within the country. He also responded to questions from students regarding a diverse number of topics related to his country. This visit was recently featured by the Azerbaijani media outlet *Azertac*. https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Azerbaijans_interfaith_peace_and_harmony_hailed_at_a_US_university-1204640

In his presentation, Mr. Aghayev outlined various points in Azerbaijani history that have helped to contribute to its current state with regards to religious relations. Azerbaijan has had a long history of tolerance as it awarded the right to vote to women as early as 1919. Shortly after this time, Azerbaijan was invaded by the Soviet army and remained under Soviet rule until the fall of the Soviet Union. During the period of Soviet rule, freedom of religion was extremely oppressed. Religious liberty was restored once Azerbaijan regained its independence.

Today, the population of Azerbaijan is 95% Muslim. Within the Muslim population, 70% are Shia, the second largest population of Shia Muslims behind Iran, and 30% are Sunni Muslims. Azerbaijan is unique in how its Sunni and Shia populations interact with each other. In this country, the distinction between the two is less significant as Sunnis and Shias can often be found praying together in Mosques across Azerbaijan. Mixed marriages between Sunnis and Shias are quite common as well.

In addition to the Muslim population there is also a significant Jewish and Christian presence within the country. In fact, the history of Christianity in Azerbaijan goes back to the first century when the apostle Bartholomew taught in the region. Recently, current leader of the Catholic Church, Pope Francis, visited the country, citing Azerbaijan's religious tolerance as the reason for his decision to visit.

In the latter part of his presentation, Mr. Aghayev touched on several interesting points in response to questions from those present. He spoke about how Azerbaijan has been able to maintain good relations with many different countries that are often considered opposing forces, such as Russia, Iran, Israel, and the United States. He also discussed certain aspects of how the government is run in Azerbaijan, including the country's dedication to secularism and education, and how religious leaders are prohibited to interfere with political matters. He mentioned that a woman sits on the Azerbaijani supreme court, and that there are Jewish and Christian members of parliament, including a Jewish member that represents a district with nearly a 100% Muslim population.

Mr. Aghayev's visit turned out to be a fascinating and enlightening experience for all those who were in attendance. It was refreshing to hear about a country that has been quite successful in promoting unity, tolerance, and peace between diverse religious groups. It is my belief that this should be a goal that all countries of the world should be working harder to attain.

Nathan Wagstaff, UVU student