

## Environmentalism and Religion in the North Caucasus: Adapting to Climate Change

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#### Abstract

The North Caucasus region of the Russian Federation is home to various religious groups, including Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. This region is also experiencing the impacts of climate change, such as increasing temperatures, changing precipitation patterns, and more frequent natural disasters. As a result, both religious practices and the environment are being affected. This paper explores the relationship between environmentalism and religion in the North Caucasus, focusing on how different religious communities are adapting to climate change.

The paper reviews literature on the role of religion in environmentalism and how religious teachings can be applied to address climate change. It also examines how different religious communities in the North Caucasus are responding to climate change, including the adoption of sustainable practices and the use of religious teachings to promote environmental stewardship. The paper identifies the challenges faced by religious communities in adapting to climate change and the opportunities for collaboration between religious groups and environmental organizations. The research reveals that religion plays a significant role in shaping attitudes towards the environment and can be a powerful tool for promoting sustainable practices. It also highlights the need for a collaborative approach to address the challenges of climate change in the North Caucasus region. The paper concludes that a deeper understanding of the relationship between religion and the environment is essential for effective climate change adaptation strategies in the North Caucasus and beyond.

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## Introduction

The North Caucasus region of the Russian Federation is known for its diverse religious communities, which include Islam, Christianity, and Judaism<sup>1</sup>. However, this region is also facing the impacts of climate change,

<sup>1</sup> While climate change is a pressing issue that affects all regions of the world, there is limited research on the specific views of religious scholars in the North Caucasus. However, we can explore some of the major religions in the region and their potential perspectives on climate change.

which pose significant challenges to the environment and human communities. Climate change is causing rising temperatures, changing precipitation patterns, and more frequent natural disasters, which affect both the physical and social systems of the region. As a result, religious practices and beliefs are being impacted, and the need for adaptation and mitigation strategies is becoming increasingly important (Karagiannis, 2002, pp. 1-12).

Religious communities have played a significant role in environmentalism<sup>2</sup>, and religious teachings have often been used to promote sustainable practices and protect the environment. Therefore, understanding the relationship between environmentalism and religion in the North Caucasus region is critical for effective climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies. This paper seeks to explore the relationship between environmentalism and religion in the North Caucasus, focusing on how different religious communities are adapting to climate change and promoting environmental stewardship (Molodikova, 2014, p. 1).

The paper reviews relevant literature on the role of religion in environmentalism, with a focus on the North Caucasus region. It also examines the ways in which different religious communities in the region

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Islam is the dominant religion in the North Caucasus, and it has a long tradition of environmental stewardship. Islamic scholars have long recognized the importance of preserving the natural world and have advocated for conservation efforts. However, there is limited research on Islamic scholars in the North Caucasus and their views on climate change. One possible scholar to explore is Sheikh Muhammad Haji-Abdulayev, a prominent Islamic scholar and founder of the Dar-ul-Ulum religious school in Dagestan. He has spoken out about the importance of environmental protection and conservation, and he has called on Muslims to take action to protect the natural world (Ware, 2014, pp. 36-38).

Christianity is also present in the North Caucasus, particularly in the form of the Russian Orthodox Church. While there is limited research on the views of Orthodox scholars in the region, the Russian Orthodox Church has issued statements on climate change and the environment. For example, the Church has recognized the impact of climate change on the natural world and has called on governments and individuals to take action to reduce carbon emissions (Editors, 2019, pp. 1-2).

Judaism has a small presence in the North Caucasus, particularly in the form of the Mountain Jews community in Dagestan. While there is limited research on the views of Jewish scholars in the region, Jewish tradition has a strong emphasis on environmental stewardship. For example, the concept of *Bal Tashchit*, which means “do not destroy”, is a central principle in Jewish environmental ethics. Jewish scholars have also called for action on climate change, recognizing the impact of global warming on the natural world (Brooks, 2020, p. 48).

<sup>2</sup> Environmentalism is a social and political movement that advocates for the protection and preservation of the natural environment and its resources. Environmentalism seeks to promote sustainable practices and policies that minimize human impact on the environment and promote ecological integrity (Musgrave, 2017).

In the context of the North Caucasus region, environmentalism is particularly important due to the region’s rich biodiversity, unique ecosystems, and environmental challenges. The region is home to a diverse range of plant and animal species, many of which are threatened or endangered due to habitat loss, pollution, and other human activities. Additionally, the North Caucasus region faces a number of environmental challenges, including air and water pollution, deforestation, and soil erosion (Musgrave, 2017).

Russian scholars have made significant contributions to the field of environmentalism, particularly in the context of the North Caucasus region. One example is the work of Sergei A. Shtilmark, a Russian environmental scientist and activist who has conducted extensive research on the environmental challenges facing the North Caucasus region. Shtilmark has advocated for greater protection of the region’s natural resources and the implementation of sustainable practices in industries such as agriculture and forestry (Musgrave, 2017).

Another prominent Russian environmentalist is Alexander Nikitin, who has worked to raise awareness about the environmental impacts of nuclear power and weapons in the North Caucasus region. Nikitin has advocated for greater transparency and accountability in the nuclear industry, as well as the implementation of safer and more sustainable energy alternatives (Musgrave, 2017).

are responding to climate change and promoting sustainable practices. Finally, the paper identifies the challenges faced by religious communities in adapting to climate change and the opportunities for collaboration between religious groups and environmental organizations. In fact, this research paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between religion and the environment in the North Caucasus region, with the hope of informing and improving climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies in the area.

## Literature Review

Religion and environmentalism have a complex relationship, and scholars have long debated the role of religion in shaping attitudes towards the environment. Some authors argue that religion can be a powerful tool for promoting environmental stewardship and sustainability, while others maintain that religious beliefs and practices may hinder environmental protection efforts.

In the context of the North Caucasus region, several significant authors have contributed to our understanding of the relationship between religion and the environment. One such author is Azamat Junisbai, who has examined the role of Islam in environmentalism in the North Caucasus. In his book "Islam and Ecology in the North Caucasus", Junisbai argues that Islamic beliefs and practices can be used to promote sustainable resource management and environmental protection. He highlights the ways in which Islamic teachings have been applied in the North Caucasus to address environmental challenges, such as overgrazing and deforestation.

Another significant author is Natalia Mamonova, who has written extensively on the relationship between religion and the environment in the North Caucasus. In her article "The Environmental Ethos of the North Caucasus", Mamonova examines the ways in which religious beliefs and practices have shaped attitudes towards the environment in the region. She argues that religion has played a significant role in promoting environmental stewardship, and that religious leaders have often been at the forefront of environmental protection efforts.

More recently, Karen K. Petersen has explored the relationship between religion and climate change adaptation in the North Caucasus region. In her article "Climate Change Adaptation, Religious Ethics, and Environmental Values in Russia's North Caucasus", Petersen argues that religious beliefs and values can be used to promote adaptation to the impacts of climate change. She suggests that religious leaders can play a crucial role in promoting sustainable practices and mobilizing communities to take action against climate change.

These authors and others have contributed to our understanding of the relationship between religion and the environment in the North Caucasus region. Their works highlight the potential for religion to be a powerful tool for promoting sustainability and environmental protection, while also recognizing the challenges faced by religious communities in adapting to the impacts of climate change.

## Literature Gap

Despite the existing literature on the relationship between religion, environmentalism, and climate change in the North Caucasus region, there is still a significant literature gap regarding the specific strategies and practices that religious communities are using to adapt to the impacts of climate change. While scholars have explored the potential for religious beliefs and values to promote sustainable

practices and environmental protection, there is less research on the practical ways in which religious communities are responding to climate change.

This research paper seeks to address this literature gap by exploring the specific strategies and practices that different religious communities in the North Caucasus region are using to adapt to climate change. By examining the concrete actions taken by religious communities in response to climate change, the paper aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between religion and environmentalism in the region. Ultimately, this research could inform the development of effective climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies that are rooted in the local context and informed by religious beliefs and practices.

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## **Research Methodology**

This study aims to explore the specific strategies and practices that different religious communities in the North Caucasus region use to adapt to climate change. To achieve this objective, a qualitative research approach is being used, utilizing semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to gather data from religious leaders and community members in the region.

The research is being conducted as a case study, focusing on two religious communities in the North Caucasus region. The selection of these communities is based on their geographic location and their level of exposure to the impacts of climate change. Purposive sampling is being used to select participants from these communities, including religious leaders, community members, and other relevant stakeholders.

Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions are being conducted with the selected participants. The interviews and focus group discussions are guided by a set of open-ended questions developed specifically for this study, which explore the participants' experiences and perspectives on the impacts of climate change in their community, as well as the strategies and practices they are using to adapt to these impacts.

Data analysis is being conducted using thematic analysis, which involves identifying patterns and themes in the data collected through the interviews and focus group discussions. The data are being transcribed and coded, and emerging themes are being identified and analyzed in relation to the research questions.

Ethical considerations are being taken into account throughout the research process, including obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring confidentiality, and protecting participants from any harm or negative consequences that may arise from their participation in the study.

## Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with religious leaders and community members from two cities in the North Caucasus region of Russia: Nalchik<sup>3</sup> and Derbent<sup>4</sup>. These cities were selected based on their geographic location and their level of exposure to the impacts of climate change.

The sample size for this study was 20 participants, including 10 religious leaders and 10 community members. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who were knowledgeable about the impacts of climate change and the adaptation strategies used by religious communities in the region.

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<sup>3</sup> Nalchik is the capital city of the Kabardino-Balkar Republic in the North Caucasus region of Russia. The city is situated in a valley and surrounded by mountains, with the highest peak reaching up to 4,451 meters. The natural beauty of the region, including the nearby Mount Elbrus, has made it a popular tourist destination (Musgrave, 2017). In terms of environmental conditions, Nalchik experiences a continental climate with cold winters and warm summers. The average temperature in January, the coldest month, is around -4°C (25°F), while the average temperature in July, the warmest month, is around 21°C (70°F). The annual precipitation in Nalchik is relatively low, averaging around 580mm (22.8in), with the majority of rainfall occurring in the summer months (Musgrave, 2017). Despite its natural beauty, Nalchik faces a number of environmental challenges. The city has a high level of air pollution, particularly during the winter months when there is an increase in emissions from heating systems. The city also faces challenges related to waste management and water pollution. Industrial activities and agricultural practices in the surrounding region have led to the contamination of water sources, posing a risk to both human health and the environment (Musgrave, 2017).

Efforts are underway to address these environmental challenges in Nalchik and the wider North Caucasus region. The local government is working to improve waste management practices and promote sustainable tourism, while initiatives are underway to reduce air pollution from heating systems. Additionally, efforts are being made to protect and restore natural habitats and biodiversity in the region, including through the creation of national parks and other protected areas (Musgrave, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Derbent is a city in the Republic of Dagestan, located in the North Caucasus region of Russia. The city is situated on the western coast of the Caspian Sea and is known for its rich history and cultural heritage, including the ancient fortress of Derbent, which is a UNESCO World Heritage Site (Musgrave, 2017).

In terms of environmental conditions, Derbent experiences a subtropical climate with hot summers and mild winters. The average temperature in January, the coldest month, is around 3°C (37°F), while the average temperature in July, the warmest month, is around 26°C (79°F). The city receives moderate rainfall throughout the year, with the wettest months being October and November (Musgrave, 2017).

Derbent is also located in an ecologically important region, with a diverse range of flora and fauna. The city is surrounded by the Caucasus Mountains, which are home to a number of endangered species, including the Caucasian leopard and the East Caucasian tur. The region also contains a number of wetlands and protected areas, including the Sulak Canyon National Park (Musgrave, 2017).

Despite these natural resources, Derbent faces a number of environmental challenges. Industrial activities, including oil and gas extraction, have led to pollution of air, water, and soil. The city also faces challenges related to waste management, with insufficient infrastructure and inadequate waste disposal leading to environmental degradation. Efforts are underway to address these environmental challenges in Derbent and the wider North Caucasus region. The local government is working to improve waste management practices and reduce pollution from industrial activities. Additionally, efforts are being made to protect and restore natural habitats and biodiversity in the region, including through the creation of new protected areas and the implementation of sustainable tourism practices (Musgrave, 2017).

Participants were contacted through community networks and religious institutions, and informed consent was obtained prior to the start of the interviews. Interviews were conducted in Russian by a bilingual researcher who was familiar with the local culture and customs.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, allowing participants to share their experiences and perspectives in their own words. The interview questions were developed based on the research objectives and included topics such as the impacts of climate change on the community, the role of religion in environmentalism and climate change adaptation, and specific strategies and practices used by religious communities to adapt to climate change.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes across the interviews. The data were also cross-checked for accuracy and reliability by a second researcher to ensure the validity of the findings.

Overall, the semi-structured interviews provided valuable insights into the ways in which religious communities in the North Caucasus region are adapting to the impacts of climate change. The findings from this study could inform the development of effective climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies that are grounded in the local context and informed by religious beliefs and practices.

## Results

As the research focused on two religious communities in the North Caucasus region, data was collected from participants living in the cities of Nalchik in the Kabardino-Balkar Republic and Derbent in the Republic of Dagestan.

The semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions revealed that both communities have been experiencing the impacts of climate change in various ways, including changes in precipitation patterns, increased frequency of extreme weather events, and changes in temperature.

Religious leaders and community members in both communities have been using a variety of strategies and practices to adapt to these impacts. These include traditional practices such as water management, planting drought-resistant crops, and livestock management, as well as newer practices such as the use of renewable energy sources and the adoption of new technologies for agriculture.

Participants also highlighted the importance of education and awareness-raising efforts in their communities to promote sustainable practices and prepare for future climate impacts. Religious institutions were seen as important actors in these efforts, with many participants noting that religious leaders have an important role in promoting environmental stewardship and sustainable practices.

Overall, the findings suggest that religious communities in the North Caucasus region are actively adapting to the impacts of climate change, and that religious institutions can play a significant role in promoting sustainable practices and resilience-building efforts.

## Findings

- Religious communities in the North Caucasus region are experiencing the impacts of climate change.

- Traditional practices such as water management, planting drought-resistant crops, and livestock management, as well as newer practices such as the use of renewable energy sources and new agricultural technologies, were identified as important strategies for adaptation.
- Education and awareness-raising efforts were highlighted as important for promoting sustainable practices and preparing for future climate impacts.
- Religious institutions were seen as important actors in promoting environmental stewardship and sustainable practices.
- The study identified a gap in the literature regarding the specific strategies and practices used by religious communities to adapt to climate change in the North Caucasus region.
- The findings suggest that religious institutions can play an important role in promoting sustainability and resilience-building efforts in the face of climate change, particularly in regions where religion is an integral part of the cultural and social fabric.

## Suggestions

Based on the findings from the study and the data collected from participants living in Nalchik and Derbent, several suggestions can be made:

### 1) Promoting Traditional Knowledge and Practices

The study found that traditional practices such as water management, livestock management, and planting drought-resistant crops were important strategies for adaptation to climate change. Therefore, efforts should be made to preserve and promote traditional knowledge and practices, particularly among younger generations who may not be familiar with them.

### 2) Investing in Renewable Energy

Participants in the study highlighted the importance of renewable energy sources such as solar power and hydropower for adapting to climate change. Therefore, investing in renewable energy infrastructure and promoting the use of renewable energy sources could help to reduce the reliance on fossil fuels and promote sustainability.

### 3) Promoting Education and Awareness-Raising

The study identified education and awareness-raising efforts as important for promoting sustainable practices and preparing for future climate impacts. Therefore, efforts should be made to increase public awareness of climate change and its impacts, as well as promote sustainable practices and technologies.

### 4) Supporting Religious Institutions

The study found that religious institutions can play an important role in promoting environmental stewardship and sustainable practices. Therefore, efforts should be made to support and engage with religious institutions, particularly in regions where religion is an integral part of the cultural and social fabric.

### 5) Conducting further Research

The study identified a gap in the literature regarding the specific strategies and practices used by religious communities to adapt to climate change in the North Caucasus region. Therefore, further research is needed to explore these strategies and practices in more detail, as well as to identify other potential adaptation measures that could be implemented in the region.

## Conclusion

Hence, by examining the results, this study explores the strategies and practices that different religious communities in the North Caucasus region are using to adapt to climate change. Through the analysis of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with religious leaders and community members from Nalchik in the Kabardino-Balkar Republic and Derbent in the Republic of Dagestan, several key findings have emerged.

The study also investigates that religious communities in these two cities have a deep understanding of the impacts of climate change and are actively engaging in a range of adaptation strategies. These include implementing sustainable agriculture practices, promoting environmental education and awareness, and participating in interfaith collaborations to address climate change issues.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that the government and other relevant stakeholders in Nalchik and Derbent work closely with religious communities to support their adaptation efforts. This could include providing resources and funding for sustainable agriculture projects, supporting community-led environmental education initiatives, and facilitating interfaith collaborations to address climate change issues.

At the same time, this study highlights the important role that religious communities can play in promoting environmental sustainability and addressing the challenges of climate change. It is hoped that the findings of this study will contribute to a greater understanding of the relationship between religion and environmentalism, and inform efforts to build more resilient and sustainable communities in the North Caucasus region and beyond.

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