

RELIGION IN SOCIETY

**RELIGION AND POLITICS:
INTERACTION AGAINST
AN AZERBAIJANIAN BACKGROUND**

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Introduction

There is a religious upsurge in the Azerbaijanian Republic (AR) directly connected with the country's political and ideological transformations and the transition period that followed the Soviet Union's disintegration in 1991. The Soviet Union collapsed along with the bankrupt Soviet totalitarian regime and the Communist ideology, allowing freedom of conscience to flourish in the republic in the absence of the "hand of Moscow" as a centralizing and controlling instrument.

A religious renaissance is taking place in the independent country; it draws its strength from the spiritual legacy rooted in our nation's ancient culture and traditions. This is primarily true of Islam, the dominating religion, yet other traditional religions have also acquired a chance to revive and develop. At the same time, new hitherto unknown nontraditional religious trends have made their way into the republic. To a certain extent, this is ex-

plained by more than seven decades of the Soviet society's "spiritual" blindness, the current quest for religious answers to the most burning issues of today, and the activity of foreign forces and foreign missionaries.

The present religious upsurge, mainly owing to the resurrection of Islam, does not allow "Western influences" to penetrate the AR, thus depriving our citizens of a chance to learn and embrace universal values found outside Islam.

The leaders of our republic are using religion as an instrument to influence the masses and strengthen their power, while foreign forces, in turn, exploit this instrument to penetrate Azerbaijan and gain a stronger foothold. This is happening in many other countries, too. The result is a situation in which it is sometimes hard to predict how it will affect the relations between religion and political power and the attitudes of the faithful. Therefore I

have chosen the following aspects: the situation in the religious sphere—the zones and confessions; ethnoconfessional minorities—territorial distribution and size; and freedom of conscience and security of the state.

The guarantees of a secular state in the religious sphere are one of the pivotal points: the state's religious tolerance has its limits. In fact, tolerance ends where the threat of religious totalitarianism appears, that is, when there is a potential threat of a

secular political system turning into a theocratic one. In a secular society, religion and the state, faith and politics cannot blend, otherwise the secular social-political order will disappear along with the democratic institutions. This will destroy the constitutional pillar of any secular state and violate the corresponding framework documents issued by the world community that regulate the relations between religion and political power and between faith and civil society.

The Current Situation in the Religious Sphere: Zones and Confessions

I have already written that Islam is the main religion in our republic, yet Christianity and Judaism also have their followers. The majority of the Muslims are Azeris, nearly all of them being Shi'a; the Sunnis are in the minority and can be described as an ethnoconfessional minority.

The country has two "Muslim zones" divided along the Baku-Shemakha-Evlakh-Ganja-Kazakh-Nakhichevan line. The southern zone is found to the south of the line and reaches the Iranian border. It is predominantly a Shi'a zone with an Azeri, Talysh, Tat, and partly Kurdish population. There is a small number of Sunnis there, too: Akhyska, Tartars, and some Kurds. There are also Christians: Orthodox Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians, Greeks, and Georgians; Russian Christian schismatics and sectarians; German Catholics and Lutherans; monophysitic Udins; Gregorian Armenians; Juur (Mountain Jews), Ashkenazim (European Jews); Ebraeli (Georgian Jews); and Geras (Russian Judaists). At the turn of the 21st century certain nontraditional trends reached Azerbaijan: Wahhabis and Nursists, Naqshbandis and Suleymanis, Ali-Ilyahis, Fayzullists and Ibrahimis among the Muslims; Hindu Krishnaitis and certain Christian Protestant sects.

The second zone goes up north to the border with Russia and Georgia; it is populated mainly by Sunni Muslims (Lezghians and Avars; Kryzes and Tsakhurs, Budugs and Khinalugs, and some Ingiloes and Azeris. The local Russians are Christians (schismatics and sectarians); the local Udins are monophysitic; some of the Ingiloes belong to the Georgian Christian church; and the local Juurs are Judaists.

This division into zones creates a clear picture of the localization of confessions and their followers, and of the places where ethnoconfessional minorities live, identifies the places populated by the followers of nontraditional trends, as well as the foreign influence on believers (activities of foreign religious organizations and missionaries in the republic), and shows the reasons for the state's persecution of followers of nontraditional trends and the results of the persecution.

Azerbaijan has never known religious conflicts among Muslims of different trends, between Muslims and the followers of other confessions, or among ethnoconfessional minorities for religious reasons; the republic was fortunate to avoid anti-Semitism and Jewish pogroms. The local Shi'ites and Sunnis are not divided: they read the Koran and its Al-i-Imran Surah, which are devoted to the primacy of monotheism and punishment of the apostates. There is no ethnoconfessional segregation either: for many centuries different confessions and numerous ethnoconfessional minorities have been living side by side in towns and villages. Take, for example, the town of Sheki: the majority of its 60,000 inhabitants are Sunni Azeris who live in peace with the local Shi'a Azeris; there are many relatives among them, they help each other in times of trouble, and attend the same mosques. They celebrate Novruz Bayramy, Gurban Bayramy and Uraza Bayramy together and live next door to each other. During the Shi'a days of mourning, the Sunnis

never celebrate their holidays or perform marriages. In Nakhichevan, the local Shi'a prefer to marry their daughters to Sunni Turks rather than to Shi'a Iranians. About 65,000 of the local people are currently working in Turkey.

By the beginning of 2004, the country had over 1,300 mosques and other Islamic cult facilities, and over 40 buildings belonging to other confessions. Today three Russian Orthodox churches are functioning in the capital of the republic. Back in 1907, one of the richest philanthropists, an Azerbaijani named Kh.Z. Tagiev, built a Cathedral of the Holy Myrrh Bearers in Baku, which fell into disrepair under Soviet power. It was restored using the money of another Azerbaijani, philanthropist A. Gurbanov, and was opened and consecrated in the presence of political leaders and representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church in 2003. Christian schismatics and sectarians have prayer houses of their own; there are seven synagogues in the republic: two in Baku, three in the so-called Krasnaia (Red) (formerly Evreiskaia, or Jewish) Sloboda (Quarter) of the town of Guba, and two in Oguz. One of the Baku synagogues built in 2003 with the help of the money of the Joint organization is the largest in the Caucasus. The old Catholic church in Baku was reconstructed; the foundation of another one was laid in 2002 during the Pope's visit to Azerbaijan. There are over 500 places of worship in the republic: burials, caves, and tombs attended by followers of different confessions.

In 2003 the Albanian Udin Christian community was registered in Azerbaijan; later the Albanian Apostolic Autocephalous Church will be restored. It functioned in Azerbaijan from the fourth century until 1836 when it was closed down by a decision of the czarist government and the Russian Orthodox Church at the request of the Armenian Church that seized the Albanian churches in Azerbaijan and Jerusalem (according to an old tradition, each of the autocephalous churches had its own quarter in Jerusalem). An Albanian church in the village of Nidzh (Gabala District), the home of an Udin ethnocultural community, is being restored with the help of Norway, a considerable part in which was played by Thor Heyerdahl, a famous traveler and academic. Norway also paid for restoration of an Albanian church opened in 2003 in the village of Kish (the Sheki District).

There are educational establishments and courses teaching the fundamentals of all the traditional confessions: the Baku Muslim University with branches in several districts; and madrasahs in Sheki, Zakataly, Lenkoran and Baku. Mosques, churches and synagogues offer religious courses to their congregations (women, men, and children). There are several religious periodicals: *Islam*, the official newspaper of the Caucasian Muslims; *Islamskiy mir* (Islamic World), *Golos Islama* (The Voice of Islam), *Jamaat* and *Nur*; and another newspaper *Islam-Press* started coming out in 2003. The heads of all confessions, senior clerics of the mosques, churches, and synagogues, and teachers at religious schools have specialized education; the majority of them are citizens of the AR.

The Zakataly District in the Northern zone has the largest number of cult buildings: there are 42 mosques for the population of slightly more than 80,000; the district center has a branch of Baku Muslim University with a boarding school and a mosque. The Nakhichevan Republic comes second with 30 mosques per 200,000; the village of Nekhram is a sort of champion: it has 10 mosques per 20,000 members of the population.

Formally, the mosques are not divided into the Shi'a and Sunni ones (with the exception of the Wahhabi mosques in the cities of Baku, Khachmaz, Gusar, and Khudat, and in the villages of Gobu, Grakhi, Neredjan, Gotagly, Gusar-chai, and Murshid-oba attended only by the local Wahhabis). The mosque in the Alley of Shakhids (Martyrs) in Baku is frequented mainly by the Sunni Turks working in the capital; they belong to the nontraditional trends of Nursists and Suleymanis, Ibrahimis and Naqshbandis, Ali-Ilyahis and Fayzullists.

By 2004, 230 religious communities completed the process of obligatory registration at the State Committee for Religious Organizations (hereinafter referred to as the Committee); 201 of them are Muslim communities; others are Christian communities of Orthodox Russians and Georgians; Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Baptists, followers of the New Apostolic Church; the Molokans, the Seventh-Day Adventists; the Pentecostals (Eastern Star); Nehelamites; the Church of Laudation; The Life-Giving Grace; and the Jehovah's Witnesses. There are also Judaic communities—of the Mountain Jews, Ashkenazim, Georgians, and Geras.

Starting in the 1990s foreign religious organizations and missionaries have been stepping up their activities; they brought in nontraditional trends with its headquarters in the United States, Sweden, Germany, Great Britain, and the Arab countries.

The Church of Laudation has been functioning in Sweden since 1995; its missionaries came to Azerbaijan with the slogan “God Loves Azerbaijan”; it was registered in 1999 at the request of foreign religious organizations: the registration process took some time because some of its charter provisions contradicted the Azerbaijanian Law on the Freedom of Religion. At first the church had 500 followers; now it has much more: its members live in Baku, Sumgait, and a few other towns and districts. In fact, its following is the largest among the nontraditional Christian communities in Azerbaijan. Nearly half of its members are young people, 50 percent of whom are Azeris. Its scope of activity and financial status allow it to organize bi-annual conferences with foreign guests; its members receive humanitarian aid and financial support; it maintains contacts with the Word of Life international humanitarian organization set up by the Swedish Church in 1983 with its headquarters in Uppsala.

The Life-Giving Grace is quite successful among young people; and the Krishnaites are fairly popular in Baku.

Local Wahhabism is not aggressive; it attracts followers with its ideas of “simplicity of religion.” Significantly, it acquired followers among the ethnoconfessional minorities (Lezghians, Avars, and Tsakhurs) who, after being removed from administrative and other structures, felt uneasy. Wahhabism has offered an outlet for popular discontent among these groups caused by ethnic discrimination and an infringement on their constitutional civil rights. It should be added that this form of protest is readily accepted by the faithful because of its commonly understood religious tinge.

On the whole, the nontraditional trends appeared because the rivaling foreign forces are prepared to go to any length to increase their influence on the local people—religion being one of their instruments. Their missionaries find eager listeners among the destitute, who need humanitarian, material and spiritual assistance—regrettably their number in the republic is large.

The spread of the nontraditional trends challenges the secular state, which fails to show enough concern for its citizens. At the same time, their popularity shows an inadequate understanding of the freedom of conscience, while very primitive propaganda of a return to the nation’s spiritual sources and the unconvincing personal example of the political and spiritual leaders are disorienting society, which has just obtained a chance to go back to their traditional spiritual roots which fit their mentality and self-identity, as well as ethnic psychology, culture, and the national idea (ideology). As a result, not only the titular nation, but also the ethnoconfessional minorities are at a loss. The nontraditional trends offer seemingly “fresh ideas,” while the missionaries fake an interest in the material and spiritual needs of their followers.

The nontraditional trends add a lot of politics to religion—this is especially true of the most popular religion, Islam. In other words, there are attempts to blend the dominating confession into the secular state and promote certain Islamic trends under the guise of “understandable” Islam. This can be interpreted as the potential transformation of the secular state into a theocratic political system, something that had never existed in Azerbaijan.

Freedom of Conscience and Security of the State

In 1991 Northern Azerbaijan became independent, while society found itself in a spiritual vacuum. This caused concern among the political leaders because the void created by the collapsed communist ideology was filled by foreign religious organizations and missionaries flocking to the republic in huge numbers. Foreign forces and nontraditional trends might have tried to replace Moscow as the dominant factor. Not only theocratic states (Iran and the Arab countries) showed a lot of interest. Secular Turkey

and through it the NATO countries were also very active. Religious influence came from the Northern Caucasus (Daghestan and Chechnia), while the U.S., Georgia, the Vatican, Armenia, Great Britain, Afghanistan, France, Pakistan, Germany, and Scandinavia were also involved.

Our country is mainly a Shi'a zone, therefore the Iranian influence was most pronounced. Tehran is acting through its diplomatic representatives, religious charities, missionaries, and the media, as well as through "agents of influence," mainly in the Southern zone. Talysh (the Lenkoran, Astara, Lerik, Masally, Yardymly, and Jalilabad districts) attracts a lot of attention.

Most of the Iranian-speaking Talyshes live in Iran, therefore the ethnoconfessional minority in Azerbaijan and Iran are doing their best to implant the idea of reunification under the aegis of Tehran. There are madrasahs that teach a politicized version of Islam and are oriented toward Iran; the same can be said about itinerary missionaries, and the radio and TV broadcasts reaching the republic from Iran.

The Iranian organization Imdad (with its headquarters in Ganja) is working in other regions, even with Sunni majorities (in Sheki, for example); it promotes the ideas of Imam Khomeini, the leader of the 1979 Iranian revolution, and supports its ideas with humanitarian aid. There is a cultural center of the Iranian consulate and a Center of Islamic Propaganda in Nakhichevan. Tehran paid for a mosque with a capacity of 1,000 in Nakhichevan and for another one in Shakhbuz; it organizes pilgrimages to the holy places of Iran. There is a bookshop called Alkhoda in Baku that offers a wide range of Islamic works, including Khomeini's writings; its branch functions in Khachmaz, a city in the Sunni zone. According to certain sources, Tehran is promoting Hezbollah, a pro-Iranian extremist organization, well-known across the Middle East for its terrorist activities.

It follows from the above that Iran's confessional presence in Azerbaijan is highly politicized; this is further confirmed by the activities of the local Islamic Party with its headquarters in Baku and branches in some of the regions, including Zakataly in the Sunni zone. This political organization is a vehicle of Iranian propaganda and political Shi'ism. Its offices abound in works and portraits of Khomeini. The same can be said about the Teaching Complex functioning at the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Baku.

Turkey, a secular republic in which Sunni Muslims predominate, is acting through its official structures and religious organizations mainly in the Southern zone (Baku and Nakhichevan). Since 1992 the Ministry for Religious Affairs of Turkey has been cooperating with certain religious communities of our country. The Turkish Youth Foundation paid for 20 mosques and madrasahs in our republic and is supporting several religious educational establishments. They are headed either by Turks or Azeris trained in Turkey. The Akhyska who found shelter in Azerbaijan receive aid from Turkish organizations; emigration to Turkey is encouraged; and they have a journal called *Akhyska* published in Turkey. Turks helped set up a department of theology at Baku State University and are now teaching there; they built a mosque of the "Ottoman type" in the Alley of the Shakhids attended by local people and Turks working in Baku. During the greatest Muslim holydays, Gurban Bayramy and Uraza Bayramy, certain categories of Baku dwellers and even deputies receive food parcels. There is a Turkic university, Kavkaz, in the capital.

In Nakhichevan Turks built a mosque for 1,000 people, the Turkish consulate runs a Cultural Center to work with the local people; and there are Turkish students at the local university. A Turkish lyceum and a bookshop selling religious and secular literature are also functioning there; two other cities have similar lyceums: one for girls in Ordubad and the other for boys in Sharur.

Ankara is prominent in the Northern Sunni zone, especially at the local mosque and madrasah in Zakataly. Turkey pays for over 100 students of the local branch of Baku Muslim University. There are Turks at the central madrasah in Sheki: teachers and the headmaster; they pay for 150 students.

Even though a Sunni country, Turkey has established closer relations in Azerbaijan, is acting in a wider area, and has more "agents of influence" than Shi'a Iran for many reasons. First, the Azeris cannot forget that for over 2,500 years the Persian states have been trying to deprive the non-Persians of their ethnic identity; this was done in relation to the Azerbaijanian autochthonous population. Early in the 1960s,

Iranian monarch Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi formulated a clear and succinct state policy of protecting Iranian interests during the White Revolution. (It is still going on in the theocratic Islamic Republic of Iran: a united territory, common history, culture, religion, and language for a single ethnos.) Second, the Turkish and Azeri tongues are close relatives, which cannot be said of the Persian language. Third, Iran is actively developing its contacts with Armenia, which seized over 16 percent of Azerbaijan's territory and is supporting the unrecognized Nagorno-Karabakh republic. Fourth, in Iran the local Armenian community enjoys certain privileges: it is allowed to produce ethyl alcohol in a country where prohibition is absolute. On top of this, one of the Armenian churches was declared "a valuable historical monument" to be placed under state protection. Fifth, Turkey supports Azerbaijan militarily and politically; through its territory our country can reach the rest of the world: the Muslim world of Hither Asia, the OSCE, and NATO countries.

The Sunni Arab East has strong positions in Azerbaijan as well. The most active are its organizations Ansar al-Islam, the Federation of the Islamic Front of the East, Wahhabi emissaries, and missionaries of other nontraditional Islamic trends. Several groups headed by an organization of Muslim students in Baku acting under the slogan "Back to Early Islam" is also rather active. A Kuwait-based society for supporting Islam built the Abu Baqr mosque and pays for it. It is the gathering place for the Baku Wahhabis. An organization called Revival of the Muslim Heritage also based in Kuwait funded construction of over 60 Muslim cult facilities in the republic. They mostly appeared in the Northern Sunni zone. Kuwait missionaries are teaching Islam in free courses of the Arabic language, the Koran, and the Shari'a. They send some of their pupils to Arab countries to continue their religious education. The Nidjat society from Saudi Arabia opened its main office in Baku and branches in Sheki and other places in the Northern zone. It does not limit itself to religious propaganda and is very active in charities which focus mainly on children under 15. The London-based Palestinian Society of Islam Support is also engaged in charitable work; in Sheki it helps orphaned children.

In 2003 the Muslim World League headed by Dr. Abdullah ibn Abdulmuhsin Al-Turki from Saudi Arabia visited our republic.

Missionaries from Jordan, Kuwait, Pakistan, and London were especially active in the Northern zone in 1991-1992. In 1993 their place was taken by belligerent members of the Taliban; later Turks replaced them.

The Arabian organizations are the main vehicle of nontraditional Islamic trends, primarily Wahhabism. Today, it has gained enough supporters to become another ethnic-confessional community composed mainly of Lezghians, Avars, and Tsakhurs, there are also Azeri and even Russian followers.

Wahhabism is an official form of Islam in Saudi Arabia, one of the richest and most influential Muslim states. Significantly, it is a strategic partner of the United States in the Arab world. We can even presume that the spread of Wahhabism in our country is not only of a confessional, but also of political nature. The Arab countries' activity earned them a niche, side by side with Iran and Turkey, in confessional and political life and "agents of influence" of their own.

Wahhabism penetrates our country from the Northern Caucasus, too: from Daghestan and Chechnia. Lezghians, Avars, and Tsakhurs living in Azerbaijan bring in Wahhabism from Daghestan, while Chechens traveling between Azerbaijan, Georgia, and the Northern Caucasus, or staying in the AR for rehabilitation or treatment, studying at local higher educational establishments or just living here, bring Wahhabism from Chechnia.

The Christian West uses all sorts of channels, including religious ones, to contact ethnoconfessional minorities. This is true, in the first place, of the United States, Sweden, Great Britain, Germany, France, and the Vatican. There are conferences and seminars dealing with religious issues organized in Azerbaijan along with local NGOs or the State Committee for Religious Organizations, as well as with the ethnic policy advisor to the President of Azerbaijan. They are attended by the heads of ethnoconfessional minorities, members of diplomatic corps in Baku, the U.N., the OSCE, and Western governmental and nongovernmental organizations. The following international forums of confessional-political nature were held in Baku:

- “State Politics in Relation to the Ethnic Minorities of Azerbaijan” was held under the aegis of the Ethnic Policy Department of the presidential administration and the London Information Network for conflicts and state development “Caucasian LINKS—for Peace and Democracy in the Caucasus” (1991);
- “Attitude of Islam to Terror: True Meaning and Distorted Interpretations” convened at the Committee’s initiative (2001);
- “How to Ensure Religious Freedom when Fighting Extremism: Problems and Positive Experience in Azerbaijan” under the aegis of the Committee and the OSCE (2001);
- “The Role of Religion in Contemporary Society: Looking for Ways to Combat Terrorism” under OSCE guidance (2002);
- “Islam in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan: Religious Freedom and Regional Security” organized by a local NGO, the Institute of Peace and Democracy, under the aegis and with the financial support of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (2003).

In October 2003 the Constituent Conference of the Union of Churches of Evangelical Christian Baptists of the AR was held in Baku. It was attended by delegates from the capital, Ganja, Sumgait, Aliabad, Zakataly, Neftechaly, Agdash, Gusary, Alibayramly, the village of Ivanovka, and guests from Russia, America, Ukraine, and Moldova.

For over 200 years now the Georgian Church has been working among the Ingiloes of Azerbaijan living along the Georgian border in the Zakataly zone. It has already baptized some members of this ethnoconfessional minority. Now these people are regularly invited to Georgia to study, where they are given Georgian names. They come back as “agents of influence.”

Since the 1990s the zone has been frequented by Vatican emissaries. In 2002 Pope John-Paul II visited the Azerbaijanian Republic. He was received at the top level. The Pope participated in founding a new Catholic cathedral in Baku and conducted a ceremonial mass for the local Catholics. Today, there are 1,200 of them in our country. It should be added that the Vatican gave \$100,000 to the victims of the Armenian aggression against Azerbaijan.

In 2003, Bartholomew II, Patriarch of New Rome, visited Azerbaijan to familiarize himself with the republic.

Armenia is pursuing its own aims when working with the local Kurds. In the 1980s, the local community reproduced a map of Kurdistan delivered from Armenia that showed some of the border areas of Armenia and Azerbaijan with Kurdish population as parts of a hypothetical Kurdish autonomy. This fictitious state included the Lachin, Kel’badjar, Gubadly, Zangelan, and Jabrail districts of Azerbaijan captured by the Armenian aggressors in 1988-1994.

Incited by the Avar People’s Society Jamaat, the Avars who have been living in Azerbaijan since the 17th century are claiming their territory in the Northern zone.

In turn, the Lezghians inspired by the international organization, the Lezghian Popular Movement Sadval, and the Lezghian National Council are talking about uniting the border areas of Azerbaijan and Daghestan into a free economic zone to be later transformed into a Lezghian state.

All sorts of organizations are working among the Jews, yet none has made any territorial or other claims. Three Jewish communities and their foreign partners are busy helping the Jews living in Azerbaijan. The republican authorities are quite satisfied. The authorities’ attitude toward the Akhyska is the same.

A Greek community, which has no territorial or other claims, receives humanitarian and other aid from the Greek embassy in Baku. The authorities are quite satisfied with them too.

Since 2002 an NGO, the International Association for Religious Freedom, which unites many confessions (its headquarters are in Washington), has been functioning in the republic. It has already held several events dedicated to religious freedom and plans to open a School of Religious Freedom in Baku.

All religious and other organizations based in the Near and Far Abroad are pursuing similar aims: exerting stronger influence on believers, ethnoconfessional minorities, and political power structures. Their methods are highly varied, ranging from charities to brainwashing; from missionaries to active dissemination of their political, confessional, cultural, and ideological views; from personal contacts to “agents of influence.” They employ all possible official channels and do not hesitate to use illegal methods to distribute their printed matter and broadcast radio and TV programs. While pressing along confessional lines, our near and far neighbors seek political and other advantages in Azerbaijan, they want to protect their positions and their investments. One of their main tasks is to find out how the religious situation can affect the activity of foreign companies; whether their presence in the AR is safe enough; whether the Azeris and ethnoconfessional minorities are free in their choice of employment; whether the local people are loyal enough to the local religious and political structures and to the states with interests in Azerbaijan; what factors (political, confessional, intellectual, cultural, economic, investment, or financial) can promote or impede the foreign presence in the AR; and what can be said about the confessional or political affiliations of potential partners.

Relations between Political Power and Confessions

The Constitution of the Azerbaijanian Republic says that all confessions are equal before the law; it bans dissemination and propaganda of religions that humiliate human dignity and contradict the principles of humanity. Our republic is a secular state in which religion is separated from the state; the educational system is secular, which means that it, too, is separated from religion. A secular state should not interfere in the confessional sphere and infringe on freedom of conscience. All cases in which the state should act differently are envisaged in the Constitution.

In real life the relations between religion and the state are guided by laws and decrees, through which official structures can control the confessional sphere and believers. These forms of continuous monitoring have been inherited from the Soviet system and the Communist Party, which strictly controlled everything around it and did not tolerate any noncommunist manifestations in any sphere, religion included.

Today, relations between the state and religious organizations are based on the following documents: constitutional articles “Religion and the State” (Art 18) and “Freedom of Conscience” (Art 48), the Law on the Freedom of Religion, a presidential decree On Setting up the State Committee of the Azerbaijanian Republic for Religious Organizations, and a corresponding document; an instruction On the Rules of State Registration of Religious Organizations, and the Rules of Administrative Measures.

The documents related to the Committee set up in 2001 allow it to monitor the conditions conducive to freedom of conscience, register religious organizations and create a data bank; and invite experts to check the curricula of religious educational establishments, as well as the constituent documents and charters of religious organizations. The Committee is expected to regularly inform the president about the religious situation in the country; it represents the state in conflicts with religious organizations, holds meetings designed to regulate relations between the state and religion, supervises the fulfillment of corresponding laws, and permits or bans the publication, export, or import of religious printed matter and other materials. It is entitled to take all necessary measures in cases of confessional or religious-political dissent, threats to the republic’s national security, or attempts to infringe on the religious freedom and lawful activities of religious organizations. It can contribute to drawing up curricula for religious educational establishments, etc.

In other words, the Committee represents the state, which is closely watching the religious sphere. It has local structures (Commissions for Religious Affairs) and a Department for Religious Affairs in the

Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic set up in 2002. Together with other official structures, the Committee regularly convenes conferences, seminars, and meetings (there were 18 of them in the past three years held in Baku and elsewhere) to explain the state's policies and intentions in the religious sphere and to issue relevant instructions (for example, the "Propaganda of Documents Regulating the Relations Between the State and Religion," and a conference-seminar was held in the city of Shemakha in 2002). Twice a month the Committee invites heads of religious communities to a seminar, at which they learn about the history of confessions in Azerbaijan and have a chance to discuss their communities' activities. The Committee is preparing a *Handbook on the Religious Organizations in the Azerbaijanian Republic* for publication to keep the broad public and believers well informed; and it publishes a *Bulletin*, which repeatedly stresses that religion should serve political power. It is distributed free of charge among all executive structures and religious organizations, diplomatic missions and offices of international organizations, and legal and physical entities. By early 2004, eight issues had been published with a total circulation of over 11,000.

The Committee is involved in organizing free courses teaching the fundamentals of the traditional religions; it draws up curricula for them, which include the principles of statehood of the AR as a special subject. It has already organized courses at which members of the Russian religious communities study the state language; the Committee is also involved in publishing literature related to the spiritual sphere. In 2003 alone, it published and distributed free of charge a textbook *Osnovy religii* (Fundamentals of Religion) for secondary schools (15,000 copies in Azeri and 5,000 in Russian) written by Prof. Rafik Aliev, the Committee's Chairman. He has also written another book *Islam*, published in 2000. When speaking at an international forum on Religious Freedom and the Freedom of Conscience held in Vienna in 2003, he presented the official conception of the AR in the religious sphere and pointed out, in particular, that though his country had been involved in numerous wars, none of them were religious. He also said that his Committee had to explain to the public that strong power alone could protect religion and religious freedom, therefore religion and power had common tasks, with the latter working hard to create adequate conditions for the former and to preserve religious pluralism and religious purity as the cornerstone of morals. The state helped its citizens to make the right choice in the religious sphere.

The Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of the Southern Caucasus helps political power work with the Muslim religious organizations and educational establishments. A. Pashazadeh has been its head since 1980, when Heydar Aliev was at the helm of the Azerbaijanian Soviet Socialist Republic. His name is associated with the Soviet system, therefore he is not trusted. As distinct from the spiritual leader of the Muslims of Russia, he offers no initiatives in the confessional and civil life of our republic.

The state ethnic policy advisor to the President of Azerbaijan, who is in charge of the ethnoconfessional minorities, has more general tasks to tackle. Political leaders look at power structures as efficient instruments when dealing with the religious and ideological spheres.

In this way the official documents, the Committee, the Spiritual Administration, the state advisor, and the power structures form a strong network that reliably protects the state's political positions in the religious sphere and supervises confessional life and the believers. The NGOs, however, are convinced that the country does not need these structures, since not one genuinely democratic society has such a thing. They regard this pyramid as a Soviet legacy, a sign of the state's political weakness, which was unable to formulate a national idea.

Political power and its structures are doing their best to protect the religious community from outside influence: religion has developed into a pillar of spiritual life that can be easily damaged by excessive politicization. Control alone can guarantee political security and religious tolerance in the confessional sphere and in the society as a whole, as well as prevent the penetration of nontraditional trends. In fact, political power looks at them as a "nonsecular" form of the main confession, as an attempt to destabilize the religious sphere and, through it, the political situation. The youth is especially responsive to nontraditional religions. This explains why the political establishment regards them as "extremist," "alien," and "fundamentalist."

On the other hand, the majority of the titular nation treats the nontraditional trends negatively as contradicting the nation's spiritual and mental makeup, self-identity, and culture. It should be said that the difficulties of the transition period are making hearts vulnerable to these trends. This is especially true of the ethnoconfessional minorities who are treated as lower-class citizens.

Political power employs nontraditional methods to fight "religious dissidents" (primarily among the ethnoconfessional minorities) in the Northern zone where Lezghians, Avars, and Tsakhurs live. The beards of the local Wahhabis are shaved off; physical violence is used against them; they are made redundant; and they are accused of high treason and brought to court. Under the pretext of combating terrorism and religious extremism (which became especially topical after the events of 9/11 in America and 23-26 October, 2002 in Moscow), all Wahhabi mosques were closed. These "legitimate" measures stabilized the situation, yet latent tension remained and a stand-by situation developed.

The local Wahhabis explain these actions by political power's desire to strengthen the influence of official Shi'ism by weakening the positions of the Sunnis in the Northern zone. At the same time, the authorities tried to defuse separatism among the Lezghians, Avars, and Tsakhurs of Russia and Azerbaijan who wanted reunification. To a certain extent, this is also true of the Talyshes, the majority of whom live in Southern Azerbaijan.

There is another important reason: the nontraditional Islamic trends are very popular among young people, the socially least protected group, and among the ethnoconfessional minorities. In these two groups unemployment is very high.

On the surface, the Wahhabis are tolerated in Baku—they have preserved their Abu Baqr mosque; those who frequent it are not persecuted; and Wahhabi literature is sold freely. The same can be said about the Nursists, Fayzullists, Ali-Ilyahis, Suleymanis, Ibrahimis, and Naqshbandis who congregate in the mosque in the Alley of the Shakhids. This can be probably explained by the fact that many of them are Turkish guest workers.

The nontraditional trends are persecuted for political, rather than religious, reasons. These efforts are intended to actively oppose separatism among the Lezghians, Avars, Tsakhurs, and Talyshes, as well as to stem, or limit, the efforts of states from the Near and Far Abroad to influence some of the Azerbaijani citizens (especially those infected by separatist sentiments) through religious channels. For example, there are more vigorous efforts to counteract the influence of Dagestan and Chechnia in the Northern zone and of Iran, in the Southern. This can be said about Nakhichevan, where Iranian and Turkish influence is being actively trimmed down. Foreign missionaries are deported; in August 2001, 22 madrasahs were temporarily closed: the sources of their funding were vague, while curricula non-existent. The graduates received diplomas that differed from those required by the state; the teaching was going on in a foreign tongue, while not all headmasters and teachers were citizens of our republic. The AR Ministry of Justice suspended the groups acting under the slogan "Back to Early Islam" guided by an organization of foreign Muslim students of Baku higher learning establishments who preached religious dissent. The republican authorities prohibited missionaries from Jordan, Kuwait, Pakistan, and the U.K. from entering the Northern zone, where in 1991-1992 they not only promoted religion, but also gathered intelligence of non-religious nature. In 1993 they were replaced with members of the Taliban who pursued similar aims; there were "Wahhabi fighters" among them. They were also deported.

In 2003, 50 communities did not receive official registration for various reasons. By a court decision, the activities of the Baptist organization, the Church of Love, was suspended for "manifestations of religious intolerance and propaganda of hatred of other religions." For similar reasons the Jehovah's Witnesses received a "final official warning." The Christian community Adra, acting among the Muslim Lezghians in the towns of Yalama and Nabran, was banned for the same reasons.

Political power is controlling the confessional sphere and can influence the believers and the ethnoconfessional minorities. Its efforts proceed in two directions: inside and outside the country, for the simple reason that not only the nontraditional trends are dangerous, but also the attempts of foreign forces to influence the believers and, through them, the political structures. In their fight against religious dissidents and separatism, the political leaders rely on official political, religious, and power structures.

C o n c l u s i o n

Both the believers and the authorities are speaking loudly about religion, yet they are not hearing one another; for this, and certain other reasons, their relations should be discussed within the “ethnos-religion-power” formula.

The titular nation of our republic (the Azeris) is mostly Muslim; the domestic and foreign policies of the AR take this into account. At the same time, power does not infringe (at least obviously) on the rights of other traditional confessions and the ethnoconfessional communities, yet it has a negative attitude toward all nontraditional religious trends as often being politically biased.

So far, it is not absolutely clear who are the “believers” and who are “religious people.” This applies to the entire post-Soviet expanse, of which Azerbaijan is a part. Faith and religion are two different things: not all believers are religious people. There is any number of people in the republic still burdened by the communist ideas; others have reached a crossroads and are looking for spiritual guidance. In the absence of clear indications and a genuine spiritual leader, this is not easy. Still others are not sure that their faith answers all the questions brought up by the difficulties of the transition period; they are not sure that their spiritual and political leaders know these answers. There is another group that asks itself, what if the religious organizations are just instruments used by the authorities? What if they serve politics rather than those who follow them and fail to provide them with much-needed moral and spiritual support? And, finally, the logical conclusion, can the confessional-political tandem be trusted?

Today, just as in the distant past, religion and politics are marching together; they are hand in glove, or two sides of one coin. A state and society might be secular or theocratic—this is irrelevant. A meeting of the highest hierarchs of the Russian Orthodox, Georgian, and Armenian churches and the spiritual head of the South Caucasian Muslims on 26 November, 2003 in Moscow provided one more confirmation of the above. They met to look for a political solution to two important problems: the Karabakh crisis and the “velvet revolution” in Tbilisi. A joint document recommending political solutions for all problems was the outcome.

Still, the separation of religion from politics is one of the main prerequisites for the continued existence and development of a secular, multi-ethnic, and multi-confessional democratic state guided by common human values. In such a state, religion should take into account the traditions and foundations of the state, and its political structure, as well as the desire of the local people to follow the familiar confessional forms.

To normalize relations within the formula described above, the state needs a conception of ethnic and religious policy to formulate the nature, aims, tasks, vectors, and mechanisms of the framework relations between religious confessions and ethnoconfessional minorities, on the one hand, and the state, on the other.

This is closely related to the following regularity: stable power runs little risk of losing its position in the state; it does not create foes in the religious sphere and is not engaged in witch-hunting; it is not tempted to shift its guilt onto confessions or ethnoconfessional minorities; and its presence in the religious sphere is hardly felt.

In the same way, a strong power, with considerable economic potential, is not afraid of confessions. As a result they are free to act, while society is less affected by nontraditional trends. In this context foreign forces are unlikely to penetrate the country under the guise of “new” religious ideas. The traditional confessions, in turn, are not pressed by the state. In fact, under these conditions there is no need to set up specialized structures for religious organizations: the believers, satisfied with their life and social status, cannot be distracted by nontraditional ideas.

Today, after the events of 9/11 in the U.S. and 23-26 October, 2002 in Moscow, a secular state regards open control over religious organizations its right and duty. It has become important for the secular state to promote “enlightened” religious feelings; to start an open theological discussion; and to create “ideological immunity” to the virus of nontraditional trends which may add political dimensions to religious processes; and the same can be said for traditional religions too.

This does not give the secular state the right to control the sphere of religious feelings; education is the most effective form of protecting any secular state and its political order if and when it reaches socio-economic and confessional-ideological stability. A secular state needs spiritual beacons, therefore, morality should be rooted in common human values and religion; together they should serve as the ideological foundation of any state (including a secular state). What is needed is a rational balance between the secular and the religious. In other words, a secular state and its political leaders should draw clear boundaries of their tolerance in relation to religion and ethnoconfessional minorities and work within the formula: "ethnos-religion-power."
