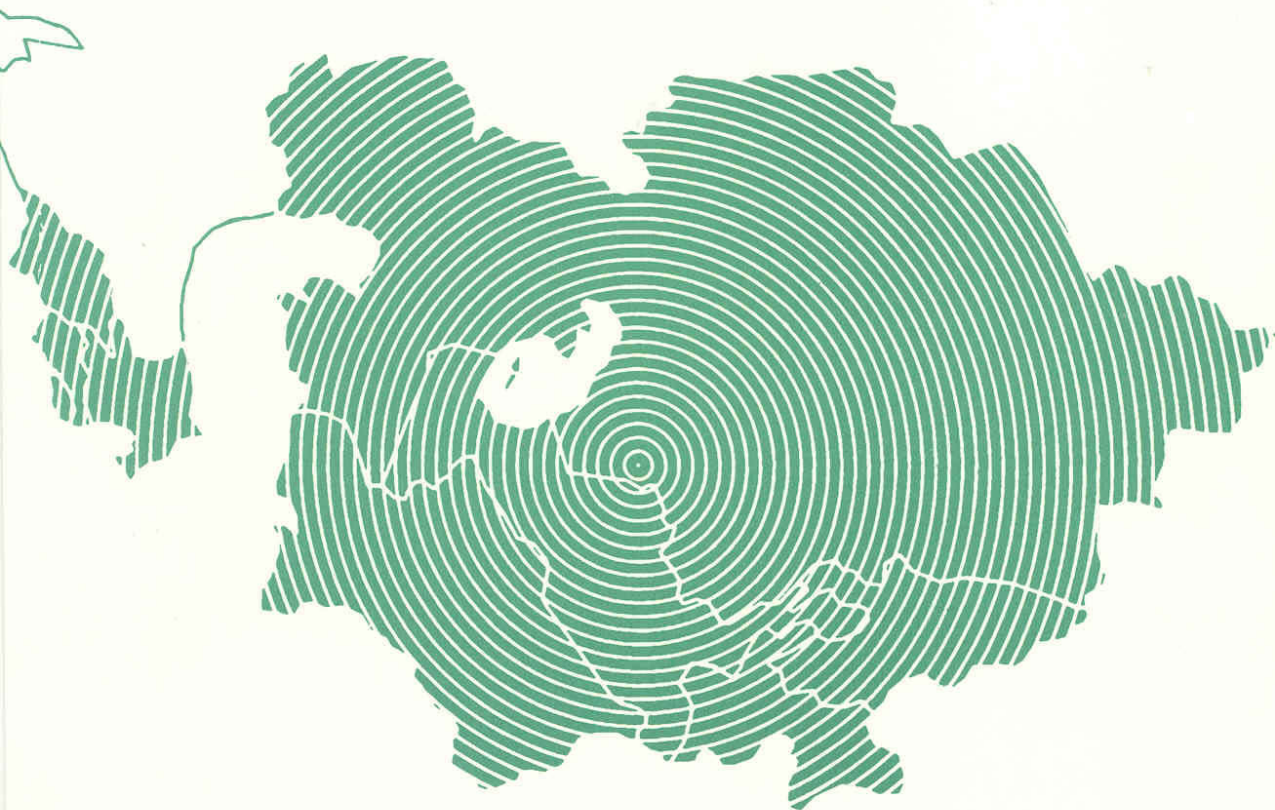


CENTRAL EURASIA

2006

Analytical
ANNUAL



CA&CC Press®
SWEDEN

Contents

<i>Rasim Gasanov</i>	ECONOMY	79
<i>Elmir Kuliev</i>	RELIGION	87
<i>Jannatkhan Eyvazov</i>	INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS	95

GEORGIA

<i>Teimuraz Beridze</i>	GENERAL OVERVIEW	105
<i>Giya Zhorzholiani</i>	POLITICS	108
<i>Teimuraz Beridze, Nodar Khaduri</i>	ECONOMY	116
<i>Zaza Piralishvili</i>	RELIGION	125
<i>Archil Gegeshidze</i>	INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS	131

REPUBLIC OF KAZAKHSTAN

<i>Timur Shaimergenov</i>	GENERAL OVERVIEW	140
<i>Askar Shomanov, Alisher Tastenov</i>	POLITICS	143
<i>Larissa Sidorova</i>	ECONOMY	149
<i>Iakov Trofimov</i>	RELIGION	161
<i>Timur Shaimergenov</i>	INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS	168

KYRGYZ REPUBLIC

<i>Leonid Bondarets</i>	GENERAL OVERVIEW	179
<i>Askar Jakishev, Zaynidin Kurmanov</i>	POLITICS	183
<i>Lyudmila Baum</i>	ECONOMY	190
<i>Kadyr Malikov, Ikbajjan Mirsayitov</i>	RELIGION	202
<i>Muratbek Imanaliev, Erlan Abdyldaev</i>	INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS	210

In many respects, Azerbaijan remains an attractive investment destination. The strategy of socially oriented market transformation has created conditions enabling the country—in cooperation with other friendly states and international financial institutions—to accelerate economic development and successfully integrate into the world economy.

RELIGION

Elmir KULIEV

*Ph.D. (Philos.),
Director of the Department of Geoculture
at the Institute of Strategic Studies of the Caucasus
(Baku, Azerbaijan)*

Introduction

In 2006, continued negotiations on Nagorno-Karabakh and the socioeconomic reforms underway in the country eclipsed religious developments. Very much as before, the events on the domestic scene and all over the world, which added weight to the religious (civilizational) component of world politics, largely influenced the country's religious context and the believers'

social and political ideas. The armed conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine, and Lebanon, as well as the threat that they might pose to other Middle Eastern countries, provoked contradictory and nearly irreversible processes in the umma, stirred up and consolidated religious political forces, and generally affected the nature of religious convictions.

State Policy in the Religious Sphere

In Azerbaijan, freedom of conscience is guaranteed by Art 48 of the Constitution, according to which every citizen "shall have the right to independently define his/her attitude toward religion, practice religion alone or together with others, or profess no religion at all, and express and spread his/her convictions."

Religious activities in the country are regulated by the Law on the Freedom of Conscience, which limits freedom "only by considerations of state and public security and in cases when rights and freedoms should be protected under the international obligations of the Republic of Azerbaijan" (Art 1). The law bans the propaganda of religious ideas which degrade human dignity, promote religious violence, or fan strife among the people with the purpose of changing their religious lifestyle.

In recent years, the state has tightened its control over religious organizations, on the one hand, while demonstrating even more concern over believers, on the other. In 2006, Idaiat Orujev, state councilor for work with national minorities and religious organizations, was appointed as Chairman of the State Committee for Religious Organizations. This was one of the central events in the country's religious life.

The Committee's new leaders met the heads of the religious communities and journalists and started a database on theologians. The newly appointed chairman announced that he intended to pursue state policy in the religious sphere and to establish closer contacts with all religious communities acting under law and not undermining social stability. After putting an end to the dissent between the Committee and the Administration of the Muslims of the Caucasus (AMC), the new chairman resolved the problem of registration of several religious communities (including those at the large Baku mosques, Teze-Pir, Gaji Ajdar-bei, and Juma of the Sabail District).

The Committee, though, is not the only state structure responsible for religious policy in the country. Many of the issues related to religious developments are outside its competence and call for the concerted efforts of the departments and ministries.

The need to improve and readjust the laws related to religious activities is one such issue. The Law on the Freedom of Conscience adopted in 1992 has become obsolete, despite the amendments of 1996-2002. In the latter half of 2006, the parliamentary Human Rights Commission started working on a new draft law. It has not yet been submitted for public discussion, but the parliamentarians are absolutely open about their readiness to discuss it with heads of the religious communities. Let us hope that the future law will not infringe on the believers' rights. Meanwhile, there is no agreement about the possible changes: most of the public would like to see tighter registration rules for small non-traditional trends that seek overall political and other control over the followers. On the other hand, the religious minorities and the religious leaders, especially those wishing to go into politics, are openly worried about the potentially stricter state control.

Alternative military service for those who cannot carry firearms because of their religious convictions remains in the center of public attention.¹ The public also wants to see the Law on Ceremonies adopted, yet the nation is showing even greater concern about the possibility of teaching the basics of religion in secondary schools. The state regards promulgating national moral and ethical values to be an absolute priority, while the broad public remains convinced that moral and ethical education of the rising generation is one of the ways to preserve national identity and spirituality in the globalized world. The issue has remained on the agenda for the past five years; the Committee's previous leadership insisted on teaching the fundamentals of religion, Muslim culture, and the history of Islam in secondary schools. The Ministry of Education argued that the secular nature of the educational system and the shortage of skilled teachers of religion-related subjects ruled this out.²

In 2006, the situation changed. Early in March Baku hosted an International Scientific-Practical Conference called "Islam and the Youth: Education, Science, and Enlightenment" sponsored by the Heydar Aliiev Foundation, the Ministry of Education, the International Islamic Relief Organization, and the Ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs of Kuwait. It revived the discussion of the role of religious values in education, which went on for the rest of the year. The Russian experience of teaching the Basics of Orthodox Culture in secondary schools was also discussed. Finally, Minister of Education M. Mardanov agreed to include the teaching of religion in the school curriculum.³ If this happens, the shortage of trained teachers for the country's more than 4,500 secondary schools will remain acute for a long time to come.

Trained theologians are few and far between; what is more, the level of their training leaves much to be desired. The teaching programs of Baku Islamic University (BIU) and the Theology Department of Baku State University (BSU) are criticized for not having many of the absolutely indispensable secular subjects. There are no textbooks in the Azerbaijani language. Today, about 30 graduates of

¹ The Law on Alternative Service was adopted as one of the obligations to the Council of Europe.

² The different points were discussed in detail in the electronic newspaper *Azerbaijanskie Izvestia*, 30 April, 2007, available at [<http://www.azerizv.az/article.php?id=6527&print=1>].

³ See: *Bulletin of the Interfax-Azerbaijan Agency*, 30 January, 2007, available at [<http://www.interfax-religion.ru/judaism/?act=news&div=16363>].

the BSU Theology Department are studying in Turkey, which breeds the hope of improved teaching of religious disciplines in the future.

At the same time, training abroad does not improve the religious situation at home—it even aggravates it. Most of those educated in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Libya, and other countries were not sent there by the Ministry of Education. Some of them come back with non-traditional religious ideas that they proliferate among their compatriots. Those who fell under their spell clash with their environment at home and at work, which causes a lot of dissent among the public and sends up social tension. According to unofficial statistics, about 2,000 young men from Azerbaijan are currently studying religion abroad. No one knows how many trained theologians there are in the country and how many of them can be allowed to teach in school.

The government is doing a lot to preserve religious architectural monuments by letting religious organizations use them as cultic buildings. The state program of the regions' socioeconomic development envisages the restoration of mosques in at least some of the regions. In Balakian, for example, restoration of Minariali mesjid, an architectural monument of the 19th century, is in progress; by December 2006, the Askhabi-kehf complex in Nakhchivan was completely restored. The Ajdar-bei and Gasym-bei mosques in Baku and the mosque in Bibi-Eybat settlement were restored and renovated. Three new buildings of the AMC and BIU are being built on the territory of the country's main mosque Teze-Pir. On 1 February, President Ilham Aliiev laid the foundation stone of a new mosque in Baku.

Religion has influenced the country's foreign policy to a certain extent. Azerbaijan is a secular state oriented toward integration into the European structures, but it is actively involved in the OIC and maintains close ties with the Islamic Development Bank and the Muslim World League. On 19-21 June, 2006 Baku hosted the 33rd Session of the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers; on 11-12 September of the same year, it served as the venue for the 5th Session of the Islamic Conference of Tourism Ministers. In September, President Aliiev took part in the opening of the headquarters of the OIC Youth Forum "For Dialog and Cooperation" in Istanbul. The Forum initiated by the National Council of Youth Organizations of Azerbaijan and the Eurasian Association of International Development was set up in December 2004 in Baku; the constituent conference elected Elshad Iskanderov as its Secretary General. This means that the political establishment of Azerbaijan is resolved to strengthen contacts with the Muslim countries and extend cooperation in the political, economic, and cultural spheres.

There was another important event in the country's religious life: on 26 February-5 March, Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights Asma Jahangir visited Azerbaijan. After meeting with officials, heads of the religious communities, and human rights activists, she said she was satisfied, on the whole, with the degree of freedom of conscience in the country and pointed out that in some cases state control infringed on the rights of religious communities or even bordered on repressions.⁴ There was a lot of truth in her comments; in fact, the state structures not always coordinate their actions with regard to the religious communities, which sometimes infringes on believers' rights. It should be added that such conflicts were promptly resolved.

Late in November, Ombudsman E. Suleymanova's interference helped the female students of Sumgayit State University restore their right to wear hijabs inside the university. On the whole, state policy in the religious sphere remained moderately liberal.

Religious Communities and Their Activities

By the end of January 2007, there were 370 registered religious communities in the country; 31 of them belonged to communities other than Islam religions: 13 Protestant, 4 Christian Orthodox (in-

⁴ See: *Zerkalo*, 7 March, 2006.

cluding one Albanian-Udin community), 7 Jewish, 3 Bahai, 3 Molokan, and 1 Krishnaitic. There are about 1,300 mosques in the country, 500 of them are registered and financially supported by the state as historical monuments; there are also over 50 churches, prayer houses, and synagogues. The Church of the Immaculate Conception belonging to the small Roman Catholic community (with about 150 parishioners) is being built in Baku.

The Administration of the Muslims of the Caucasus is the largest religious center, which under the current laws unites the Muslim communities, regulates their activities, and presents them for state registration at the Committee. Many of the Islamic communities, however, remain formally attached to this nongovernmental organization, while imams of some of the large mosques (such as the Shiahidliar and Ilahiyat mosques in Baku; the Juma mosque of the Nariman District, Juma of the Sabail District, and others) prefer to act on their own.

The AMC does next to nothing to educate the nation; its leaders limit their efforts to mullahs' speeches at burial ceremonies and in mosques on Fridays. In fact, marriage and burial rituals are the mullahs' main duties. Nearly all of them are loyal to power and do not want political changes lest they lose their incomes. For the same reason, they disapprove of the spread of Christianity and reformist and renaissance ideas in Islam.

The Qadi Council and the Scientific Religious Council that function at the AMC offer their opinions on religious issues from time to time. The AMC is more active: it interprets sociopolitical processes in a way which, more often than not, is far removed from the political neutrality befitting the clergy. More than that: the contacts between the AMC leaders and the mass of believers are very weak; neither the Administration of the Muslims of the Caucasus, nor its structures run Internet sites.

Very much as before the AMC Chairman Sheikh ul-Islam A. Pashazadeh focused a lot of attention on his public functions: he represented the Muslims of Azerbaijan during his visits to Saudi Arabia, Iran, Georgia, Russia, and other countries, and met foreign political and religious figures.

At a meeting with Catholicos-Patriarch of all Georgia Ilia II in Tbilisi, he raised the issue of returning the Ganja city gates, taken to Georgia as a war trophy in the 12th century, to Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan has tried many times, without success, to settle the issue. In turn, the Patriarch of Georgia repeatedly asked the AMC leaders, equally without success, to help the Georgian Patriarchate return the church in Gakha (a monument of the 18th century) and in the Ambarchai village. The latter stood at the site of an Albanian cathedral ruined in the 18th century. Some members of the expert community objected to the churches being exchanged for the Ganja gates.

In August, at a press conference that concluded Sheikh ul-Islam's meeting with King of Jordan Abdullah II, the former announced that he was prepared "to declare a jihad to liberate the occupied Azerbaijanian territories."⁵ The clergy and the public hailed the statement; some of the believers publicly expressed their readiness to join the jihad if it were proclaimed.

The Baku Caspian Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church, restored on 28 December, 1998, is another of the republic's large religious centers. The diocese has five Orthodox churches: three in Baku, and one in Ganja and Hachmas. The Cathedral of the Holy Wives in Baku is the main church in which the bishop serves.

The followings of other religious organizations are small and their influence on the religious situation is negligible.

The government believes it extremely important to preserve the tradition of religious tolerance, the result of the coexistence of followers of various confessions in one country. Normally, various religious communities peacefully live side by side and maintain constructive and friendly relations. In recent years, the religious communities have entered a new phase of social involvement, reached even better mutual understanding, and acquired experience of joint charitable activities. This created a

⁵ See: *Zerkalo*, 24 August, 2006.

foundation for further development of conceptual principles of the religious dialog. Over 50 religious communities of different confessions joined the religious alliance For Peace and Agreement founded in 2004.

Working together with international structures, the Alliance carried out several programs, including one entitled Religious Communities Against AIDS. In January, the Committee chairman discussed with UNDP Resident Coordinator Marco Borsotti the possibility of enlisting religious communities in the countryside to engage in anti-avian flu prophylactics. With the change in AMC leadership, however, the Alliance found it harder to function and almost fell apart.⁶

Most of the religious communities are poor and organizationally unstable; in the absence of interest from local politicians and businessmen, they have to look at foreign centers and charities for funding. In the absence of laws regulating organizational matters and the functioning of religious funds (waqfs), religious figures cannot achieve financial independence and extend their possibilities. In these conditions, those groups that function on foreign money enjoy certain advantages, which accounts for the spread of non-traditional religious forms in Azerbaijan.

The country's religious communities could have avoided many problems in their relations with the state had they developed social-religious programs of their own to clarify the key points of their beliefs and religious practices and their attitude toward a secular state, state symbols, military service, etc. This would have added transparency to what the communities were doing, made them more manageable legally, much clearer for the public, and prevented the spread of religious extremism and totalitarian sects. New laws are needed to achieve this, as well as an improved procedure of state registration of religious communities.

The Public and Religion

State guarantees of freedom of conscience and the public's more tolerant treatment of non-traditional religions raised the interest in religion and individual beliefs. Recently both the traditional (Shi'a and Sunni Islam, Orthodox Christianity, Albanian Monophysitism) and non-traditional trends have acquired more followers. The Muslims remain the main vehicles of religious resurrection in Azerbaijan.

According to official sources, 96 percent of the country's population are Muslims, yet the number of practicing Muslims is negligible. At the same time, intellectuals and academic and political elites are being drawn in ever-increasing numbers into religious life. The main religious holidays—Gurban Bayram (Id al-adha) and Ramadan Bayram (Id al-fitr)—are invariably accompanied by charity functions, in which the local executive structures are also involved.

In 2006, Gurban Bayram, which crowns the hajj, was celebrated twice—on 10 January and 31 December. In January, about 3,450 Azeri Muslims performed hajj; by the end of the year, their number had increased to about 4,500; leaders of political parties and Milli Mejlis deputies joined the group of pilgrims.

The artistic community likewise is involved in the process. Early in 2006, film directors A. Jabbarov and M. Agazade completed their UNESCO-commissioned documentary *Celestial Echo* about Azerbaijanian religious music. In September, another project was launched: a short film about the traditions of religious tolerance in Azerbaijan was filmed in the village of Kish, where a museum of the Church of St. Elisha, the Caucasus' earliest Christian monument, was opened in September 2003.

⁶ The Muslim clergy was not overjoyed when the Alliance was formed; it wants to preserve the AMC as the country's only Islamic center (see: [<http://www.islam.com.az/modules/news/article.php?storyid=156>]).

The religious revival attracted new followers to the mosques; most of them were moderate Muslims who regarded this religion as their personal choice and a source of spiritual perfection. As a rule, they were also involved in economic and public life.

Few of the believers studied religion and promoted a religious lifestyle. In most cases they are enthusiastic young men who, in the absence of Islamic educational centers, had to turn to religious agitators preaching pro-Iranian, pro-Arabic, or pro-Turkish religious ideas.

The state is working hard to make Islam an inalienable part of the national idea. This has not happened so far—on many occasions religiosity breeds social contradictions or even conflicts. The low religious culture, the absence of a system of spiritual education, the presence of the social and economic problems that still haunt the nation, as well as open propaganda of mass culture and moral vices make the situation even worse. This drives people to radical Islam of all hues. Latent radicalism encouraged by certain religious figures is another reason for radicalization. These people exploit religious solidarity, dedication to the outward manifestations of faith, the spiritual leaders' charisma, and fanatical rejection of everything that contradicts religious convictions.

There were sporadic attempts to turn Islam into a political tool and its followers into a strong potential opposition to the ruling party. In 2006, the public was not ignited, but those who place their stakes on this refused to be discouraged. Some of the opposition media discussed the prospects of a stronger political Islam. On 6 April, *Yeni Musavat* reprinted an article from the American *Weekly Standard* about the rising Islamic presence in Azerbaijan. It devoted much space to the unfolding Salafi movement, which, according to the article's author, had already acquired a 20,000-strong following, and to the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan, which, by the time its official registration was annulled in 1995, had about 50,000 members. The article described Azerbaijan as a country located in the very center of several powerful geopolitical tectonic plates closely watched by the Foreign Intelligence Committee of Iran, which set up an Azeri department in 1995.⁷

In April-May, a sociological poll (conducted with the support of the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy) revealed that about 20 percent of the republic's population would hail the Shari'a legal system for the country, while about 50 percent preferred conservative religious and moral values; and 40 percent would side with the Islamic countries in any international disagreement with the non-Muslim states.⁸ At the same time, the religious figures, who the previous year, on the eve of the parliamentary elections, were actively involved in politics, readjusted their position and started talking about the impossibility of an Islamic revolution in Azerbaijan.⁹ What was behind the U-turn? On the one hand, previous experience demonstrated that the social base of political Islam was too weak. On the other, the Committee's new leader removed the contradictions that marred the relations between the Committee and AMC and bred the hope of political dividends.

It would be wrong, though, to interpret these statements as the religious leaders' resolute withdrawal from politics. This is best confirmed by the wave of indignation on the part of both the functionaries of the Islamic Party of Azerbaijan (IPA) and heads of many of the religious communities and NGOs caused by R. Aslanova, Chairperson of the Parliamentary Human Rights Commission, who spoke against the continued existence of pro-Islamic political parties in the country.¹⁰

⁷ P. Church, "The Azeri Edge: With Oil, Questionable Elections, and a Rising Islamic Presence, Azerbaijan May Be at a Crossroads," *The Weekly Standard*, 28 March, 2006, available at [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0RMQ/is_2006_March_28/ai_n16346215].

⁸ See: *Bulletin of the Turan Information Agency*, 12 June, 2006, available at [http://gender-az.org/shablon_ru.shtml?doc/ru/news/12_06_2006_01].

⁹ See: A. Rashidoglu, "Islam vsio bol'she ovladevaet umami riadovoykh azerbaijdzantsev," *Zerkalo*, 15 April, 2006.

¹⁰ See: *Uch nogte*, 12 August, 2006.

International Impact on the Religious Situation at Home

Revival of political Islam in Azerbaijan may be partly caused by the extremely deteriorated relations among confessions elsewhere in the world and the open disdain for Islam in the West. This was amply confirmed by the cartoon scandal which started with the cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad that appeared in some of the Western newspapers. The response in Azerbaijan was firm yet not excessive.

The intelligentsia and the academic community were unanimous in their indignation over the infringement on the Muslims' religious feelings; the religious political forces, in turn, took advantage of the opportunity to bring crowds into the streets. On 27 February, the IPA organized a round table of some of the leaders of public movements and political parties who resolutely condemned the very fact of the publication of the cartoons and the blowing up of a mosque in Samarra, Iraq. Some people insisted that the blast of the Shi'a sanctuary was synchronized with the Muslim world's unity in the face of the insults to and denigration of Islam. It was suggested that the Azeri contingent should be removed from Iraq.

The Baku mayor's office refused to sanction protest rallies and demonstrations, as well as picketing of the offices of international organizations; however, on 7 February, about 300 gathered in front of the Foreign Ministry. Official permission came at the moment when the police invited the gathering to leave the square. The rally read out its address and left without much ado. The same day, there was a meeting in the Nardaran settlement outside Baku.

On the whole, the protest rallies of believers were closely supervised; the wait-and-see policy of the law-enforcement bodies allowed the government to assess the radical pro-Islamic forces' organizational potential. On the other hand, the West got a glimpse of the country's potential future if the democratic and economic reforms fall through. The official clergy and the Sunnis showed a lot of good judgment and caution. They limited themselves to critical comments and called on their followers not to rise to the provocations.

It was against this moderate background that on 11 February the *Yeni Heber* weekly carried insults against the Prophet Jesus and the Virgin Mary, equally venerated by Christians and Muslims. By way of explanation, the author said that the insults were intended as a response to the humiliating cartoons, but the religious leaders sharply denounced him.

Israel's invasion of Lebanon was another event that caused heated protests in the republic. The position of the Israeli politicians and the military was denounced even though the actual context was far from unambiguous. First, in the past, Hezbollah was responsible for several terrorist acts in Azerbaijan. On top of this, Hezbollah is supported by the IRI clerical regime, which maintains economic and political contacts with Armenia and is guilty of infringing on the rights of the Iranian Azeris. There is a strong Armenian diaspora in Lebanon; it was in this country that the fighters of the ASALA Armenian terrorist organization were trained. In addition, the contacts between Azerbaijan and Israel are developing dynamically.

The above notwithstanding, in July and August, the Shi'a groups carried out an extensive propaganda campaign that involved politicians and public figures; they tried picketing the Israeli and American embassies in Baku.

In September, Pope Benedict XVI gave another cause for sharp criticism by quoting a denigrating comment about Islam and the Prophet Muhammad, which was interpreted as another provocation designed to increase tension between the Muslims and the Christians. This raised another wave of protest and unrest in the Muslim world. In its statement, the AMC pointed out: "There is the impression that

these thoughts create another link in the chain of deliberate and malicious anti-Islamic statements coming from the West.”¹¹

On 19 September, Chargé d’Affaires ad interim of the Apostolic Nunciature of Vatican Rolandas Makritskas arrived in Azerbaijan. At a meeting with Sheikh ul-Islam, he expressed his regret over the Muslim world’s negative response to the Pope’s speech, but offered none of the apologies the Muslim clergy very much wanted to hear. The intelligentsia was obviously worried that the period of reconciliation and dialog associated with John Paul II had seemingly come to an end.

The Pope’s speech inspired sharp anti-Islamic comments: on 1 November, the little-known *Senet* newspaper carried an article by a certain R. Tagi who insulted the Prophet Muhammad. A wave of indignation swept the country, while the religious community and the intelligentsia denounced the author. The responding criticism was moderate and constructive. It was mainly said that freedom of the press should not be abused and that religious feelings and convictions should be respected.

The situation worsened when two Iranian theologians sentenced R. Tagi to death; on 11 November, a rally in Nardaran also demanded that the guilty journalist be punished.

On 15 November, the Nasimi District Court of Baku sentenced S. Sadagatoglu, the editor of the *Senet* newspaper, and the journalist to two months in prison for fanning religious strife and religious intolerance. In response, a small group of journalists and cultural figures abandoned Islam to protest against what they described as encroachment on the freedom of the press. The public remained indifferent. The short-lived scandal around the publication demonstrated once more that neither the state, nor the religious community, nor the intelligentsia would tolerate any attempts at undermining religious peace and harmony in the country.

C o n c l u s i o n

Religious life in the country went on without ups and downs, while the nation displayed a heightened interest in religious beliefs and religious practices. Foreign religious centers and missionary organizations remained the main source of destabilization together with certain international events and the interests of non-traditional religious groups, which interfered with the interests of most of the nation indifferent to religious activities.

The level of religious education remained inadmissibly low; the government was not consistent enough when it came to defending national cultural values. There is no Islamic cultural center in Azerbaijan that might be involved in promoting the moral and ethical values of Islam in the context of secular statehood.

There is no legal interpretation of the principle of separation of religion from the state. This is a serious problem, since against the background of active reform of the state institutions, the activities of the religious communities remain non-transparent and, in many respects, are proceeding beyond state and public control.

At the same time, the traditions of religious tolerance in Azerbaijan allowed the religious institutions to develop into a spiritual vehicle of civil freedoms and unbiased critics of the social and political changes from the viewpoint of their correspondence to moral principles and fairness in their religious and democratic meaning.

¹¹ See: *Information Bulletin of the Regnum Agency*, 20 September, 2006, available at [<http://www.regnum.ru/news/707844.html>].