

TURSAM Center for Strategical Studies
www.tursam.org; tursam@tursam.org
Dr. Ahmad Shahidov
www.shahidov.com; ahmad@shahidov.com

FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND TOLERANCE: EXPERIENCE OF AZERBAIJAN REPUBLIC

Establishment of a dialogue between nations and cultures was important for protection of various cultures of the humanity. The experience of countries and regions rich in the traditions of tolerance and patience could serve an example in this connection. The peaceful coexistence of a number of nations and religious confessions in Azerbaijan is a unique pattern of tolerance.

These traditions come from ancient times: the Jews running away from the Jewish kingdom, ruined as a result of occupation of Jerusalem by Babil ruler Novukhodonosur the Second (586 B.C.) found refuge on the territory of Azerbaijan. According to the historical data, Babil captured nearly 40 thousand of prisoners.

The first followers of Christianity settled in Azerbaijan in the first century A.C. and laid a foundation of Albanian autocephaly church that later was set up there. The traditions of tolerance even strengthened with the spread of Islam on the territory of Azerbaijan. The Muslim tolerance bases on the suras and citations from the holy book Koran. According to historians Muslims displayed tolerance and patience to Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrian trend in 7th-8th century.

The common fate of numerous ethnic and religious groups residing on the territory of Azerbaijan played a great role in the establishment of strong contacts between them. Peoples residing in Azerbaijan through the whole its history repeatedly fell under the dependence on other strong states and the established situation obliged them to get closer despite differences in views. The collapse of the Soviet Union turned into a hard ordeal for traditions of religious tolerance in the region. Because of this process, the peoples of the former union republics gained liberty of faith along with independence. The Armenian occupation, causing death to thousands of innocent people and making millions of our compatriots flee their houses, threatened the tolerance peculiar of Azerbaijan. Though Azeri-Armenian conflict did not have a religious ground the religious leader of Armenia Vazgen the First was in fact one of the inciters of the separatist movement.

The irreconcilable Armenians tried to spread a myth in Russia and West that Islam in Azerbaijan threatens the peace. From the other hand, some forces tried to convert Muslim population of the republic into Christianity for spreading anti-war and even pro-Armenian tendencies. No doubt, that such a movement did not serve the strengthening

of a dialogue between religions. Yet these processes could not have a decisive negative impact on relations between religious confessions.

Relations between different religions improved after Heydar Aliyev had come to power. No doubt, that clergyman also made a definite contribution to the preservation of traditions of tolerance. All religious confessions are equal before the law and have the same status in frames of the model of state-religion relations of present-day Azerbaijan. Along with ensuring the rights of Muslims constituting the majority of the country citizens, the government of Azerbaijan takes care of other religions spread in the country as well. Thus, the building of the head church Djen Mironosets, shutdown in 1920 was delivered to the Russian Orthodox Church in 1991. All-Russia and Moscow patriarch Alexei the second, staying on visit in Azerbaijan, declared this temple holy and attached the status of the cathedral church to it on May 27, 2001.

The government also takes care of the catholic communities registered by the government because of the efforts of Polish priest Yerzhi Pilyus. The first meetings were held in the houses of the pious; a building was bought for the purpose in 2000 and turned to a small church. Two priests appointed by Vatican serve in the catholic community and the pious pray on Sundays and days of religious festivities. A catholic church, the project of which has been agreed upon with Vatican, is currently being constructed in the capital of Azerbaijan.

It will resemble the former catholic church of Baku by its external design. The cultural heritage of the country's Jewish community which has ancient traditions is also attached a great deal of attention by the government of Azerbaijan. It would be enough to mention that the department of Judaism has been established within the faculty of Oriental studies of the State University of Baku and the Institute of Ethnography of the National Academy of Sciences has started working out the book "The Jews in Azerbaijan" in cooperation with the Russian fund for development and protection of Jewish culture. Moreover, an international seminar devoted to the mountain Jews of the Caucasus was held in the National Academy of Sciences of Azerbaijan in 2001 and Semyon Ikhiilov, chair of the religious community of mountain Jews was conferred with the order of Fame late 2000.

The organization for relations between Azerbaijan and Israel and the society Sokhnut had been operating in the country since 1990. The interviews with famous representatives of Jewish communities were issued in the newspapers of the country at Jewish holidays. The memory boards have been preserved on the houses, places of residence of such prominent Jewish people as Lev Landau, theorist physician and winner of the Nobel award, Solomon Qusman, the honored doctor of the Republic, Albert Aqarunov, war hero and other well-known persons in Baku.

Speaking about the care displayed for Jews in Azerbaijan particular attention should be paid to Krasnaya Sloboda district. The district is the only place of compact residing of the Jews in the whole post-Soviet area (nearly 4 thousand people live there). Azerbaijan

accounted for 11 synagogues in period preceding the establishment of the USSR. Only one of them operated in the Soviet times. The government after 1996 restored two more synagogues. The ceremony devoted to the restoration of the two-storied six-dome synagogue was held with participation of state officials and a number of foreign visitors in October of 2001.

Azerbaijan never admitted anti-Semitism. The former President of Azerbaijan Heydar Aliyev told at the meeting with Jewish communities held November 15, 1998: "Such events are not registered in the Republic and we'll never permit them to be". The valuable experience of Azerbaijan in the sphere of interreligious dialogue and cooperation has been highly appreciated and is well known to everyone in the world. The historical visit of the former head of the Roman Catholic Church Johan Paul the Second may serve the brightest example of that (May 22-24, 2002). The pontific highly appreciated the traditional historical patience of Azerbaijan. Historically those Christians persecuted by the Roman government found refuge in our country.

The Patriarch of Rome Varfolomei the first paid an official visit to Azerbaijan on April 16-18 of 2003. The visit aimed to agree on a number of complicated problems exciting concern of people of different religions, to establish close relations and to advance the interreligious dialogue. The patriarch had visited three Muslim countries before arriving in Azerbaijan. He acknowledged that relations state-religion as well as the traditional and nontraditional religious confessions is exemplary. He said: "I'm satisfied with the level of tolerance in the country. Everyone in Azerbaijan can practice any religion he wants and in any way he wishes".

It should be mentioned that the national government constantly meets with the leaders of religious communities and displays interest in their problems and needs. President Ilham Aliyev always delivers congratulating speeches on the major religious holidays of Christians and Jewish people. Thus, in his speech on occasion of Christmas holiday addressed to the orthodox community of Azerbaijan in January, 2004 the President noted that the historical tolerance and patience formed in Azerbaijan had turned to one of the properties typical of the Azeri society. The document stated: "The holiday that embodies the victory of the Good over the Evil and concepts of freedom is celebrated every year by all Christians of the world. The orthodox community that resides in Azerbaijan for over 200 years and displays devotedness to their religious values conducts various ceremonies aiming to strengthen the sincerity and friendship between the people and undertakes different measures for worthy celebration of the holiday."

The constructive position of religious leaders also plays an important role in the formation of tolerance in Azerbaijan. Due to that, the meeting of religious leaders of Russia and the Caucasus countries held in Moscow on November 26, 2003 is of great importance. The said historical event resulted in acceptance of a due document.

The document stated that the national minorities must be integrated in all spheres of public life, their liberty of faith must be ensured and they must be created conditions for development of their cultures and language for restoration of mutual understanding between the peoples of the Caucasus.

The meeting of former Roman Pope Johan Paul the second with a presidium comprising clergymen of our country was one of significant events in the development of interreligious dialogue. The presidium included Allahshukur Pashazade, chair of the Caucasus Muslims Department, the episcope of the Baku and Russian orthodox Alexander and Semyon Ikhiilov, chair of the religious community of mountain Jews. At the meeting held in Vatican November 18, 2004 the pontific highly appreciated the relations between the religious confessions in Azerbaijan and expressed regret about the bloody conflicts in the Caucasus. "He announced: "No one has been permitted to use religions as a means for aggression, violence and murder and present as designed for the said purposes. On the contrary, the interreligious friendship and mutual respect constitute the real progress and peace.

The State Committee for the Work with Religious Associations of Azerbaijan makes a great contribution to the protection and preservation of the traditions of tolerance. The said organization permanently conducts meetings and seminars with participation of religious leaders for establishment of closer relations and mutual understanding between them. Thus, the committee for work with religious communities held a seminar covering the topic "Religious stability-the integral part of the common stability" on April 3, 2004. The seminar participants discussed the religious tolerance and the role of religious communities in the combat with terrorism and approved the participation of Azerbaijan in the international coalitions targeting the terrorism. At the same time it was noted that neither Islam nor any other religion can be regarded as terrorism.

The Committee for work with religious communities arranged subsequent seminars (ten) for the leaders of religious communities from September 8 till November 10 of 2004. The seminars mainly focused at the discussion of the relations between the state and religions and the strengthening of tolerance between various trends in religion. Thus, the first seminar was entitled "The state and religion: seek for the social peace and unity of thoughts".

Professor Rauf Guseynov delivered a lecture on the history of Christianity in Azerbaijan on October 6, 2004. The last seminar was devoted to the topic "The way to religion and peace". Professor Rafiq Aliyev, chair of the state committee concluded the works carried out for the development of mutual understanding and unity of thoughts of different religions of the country and determined the trends in cooperation for the sake of the entire population.

NGOs and international organizations also contribute to the expansion of cooperation between representatives of different religious confessions. Thus, a seminar

on the role of Islam in formation of tolerance in the South Caucasus was held at the International Press Center on June 22, 2004. The seminar arranged by the Fund of Frederick Nauman (Germany) in cooperation with the independent consulting center "For the Civil Society" (Azerbaijan), the international center for Conflicts and Negotiations (Georgia) and The US Committee for Jews (USA) was attended by representatives of different religions, politicians, historians and experts from Azerbaijan, USA, Germany and Georgia. The Ambassador of Germany Claus Grewlikh paid a particular attention to the unique model of the relations between the state and religion in Azerbaijan. Within the framework of this model, the representatives of religious communities are not satisfied with neighborhood they even try to interact in their activities. "The interreligious tolerance and patience typical of Azerbaijan can serve a positive example for all European states.

Now it is possible to export the model of relations between religions and the state in Azerbaijan. This is your wealth"-the ambassador said. At the international symposium on the Islamic civilization in the Caucasus President Heydar Aliyev said: "There are a number of religions in the world and each of them occupy its own specific place. We Azerbaijanis being proud of our religion-Islam, have never displayed negative hostile attitude, towards other religions, never been at enmity and never obliged other nations to practice our religion.

Overall, Islam is notable for tolerance to other religions and coexistence in conditions of mutual understanding with other religions. This process has been registered both in Azerbaijan and in the Caucasus. Christianity and Judaism existed and currently exist in Azerbaijan along with Islam. We consider people of any religion or nationality should respect other cultures, religions and moral values and be patient to unpleasant traditions of other religions.