

The Role of Religion in the South Caucasus – Conflict Prevention and Mediation?¹

Introduction

The Caucasus is not only where Europe and Asia, the Christian and Islamic worlds, meet, but is also home to competing political models. Secular states with a majority Muslim population, such as Turkey and Azerbaijan, compete with the Islamic Republic of Iran and the highly Islamized project to establish an independent national state in Chechnya over the best means to gain control of the development of their countries. Multi-religious states, whether like Georgia, whose national church enjoys a special status under the constitution, or the Russian Federation, which is religiously neutral – at least in theory – contrast sharply with countries such as Armenia, which is now more or less completely homogeneous in terms of religion and whose national Armenian Apostolic Church is a vital part of national identity.

The complex religious map of the region reflects its situation as a zone of contact between different cultures and long-vanished empires. Large areas of the Caucasus were subject, at least nominally, to Iranian dominance from the south for several centuries both before and during the Islamic era and were thus part of the Iranian cultural area. In contrast, western parts were frequently ruled by powers based in Asia Minor, i.e. the Eastern Roman Empire, Byzantium, and the Ottoman Empire. Although but a few ruins remain to testify to the presence in the Caucasus of Zoroastrianism – the state religion of Sasanian Iran – the religious legacy of the Shiite Safavid dynasty that ruled Iran from 1501 until 1732 is obvious: Some 70 per cent of Azerbaijanis, six per cent of Georgians, and three to four per cent of Dagestanis are Shiites.

Islam arrived in the region with the Arab-Islamic conquerors in 644, only a few years after it had been founded. Among the groups with whom the Arabs came into contact were Christians of various denominations, including Armenians and Caucasian Albanians, adherents of the Apostolic Church, who had been converted to Christianity in the late 200s/early 300s, and the Cartvelian (Georgian) peoples, most of whom had belonged to the Orthodox church since the 4th century. These groups converted to Christianity during their periodic inclusion within the (Eastern) Roman Empire, and the schism that split the 5th-century Council of Chalcedon divides the region's Christians in matters of faith to this day.

The expansion of the Russian Empire in the late 18th and 19th centuries strengthened the Christian presence by encouraging a wide variety of Chris-

¹ The article covers the period up to August 2004.

tian peoples to settle in the region: Orthodox believers fled to this borderland area of the Russian Empire in order to practise their religion unmolested, Armenians migrated to the Caucasus from the Ottoman Empire and Iran, protestant Germans were settled as colonizers in the Caucasus, and industrialization, especially in the Baku area, together with the need for military and administrative personnel, ensured a constant flow of European immigrants from all sorts of backgrounds. With them came Ashkenazi Jews, who were probably no less astonished than are visitors to the region today to encounter the Tats or Mountain Jews, who have lived here since ancient times. Traces of all these groups can still be found in the various republics and regions of the Caucasus.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, the trend towards ethnically and religiously homogeneous territories increased. In some ways, this had already started during Soviet times, as representatives of the so-called "titular nations" had begun to force members of other ethnic groups out of official positions in the state bureaucracy in the 1960s. This process became irreversible following the independence of the three South Caucasian republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia in 1991, as Moscow and the Soviet Communist Party were no longer able to exert a restraining influence. To a certain extent, this process merely mirrored the demographic tendency of the post-War years. During this period, the Muslim peoples in the Caucasus (and the Armenians) have had considerably higher birth rates than the Russians and other Europeans, and this has begun to gradually effect the region's demographics (births per 1,000 inhabitants 1994: Armenia 13.5, Azerbaijan 21.6, Georgia 9.7, Russian Federation 9.5). For the cause of the most significant demographic change, however, we need to turn to the conflicts that broke out throughout the Caucasus following the collapse of the Soviet Union. These led to mass displacement, floods of refugees, and the emigration of many individuals. The result was a strengthening of the dominant religious groups not just in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, but also in Chechnya and Dagestan.

Religion in Post-Soviet Society

In transition societies, religion generally fulfils the functions of identity formation and social stabilization. Religion can give meaning and direction to individuals' lives, it encourages solidarity at the community level, and is an important explicit or implicit element of the new national ideologies. In the late 1980s and early 90s, the number of religious congregations in all three South Caucasian republics grew rapidly, and the importance of religion increased correspondingly. In Azerbaijan, for example, the number of mosques grew from 16 in 1976 to well over 1,000 today. This trend is continuing, even if the pace has slowed down. The emphasis is now on consolidating the con-

gregations that have been formed and establishing effective and sustainable nation-wide structures. It is also important to note that religious sentiment tends to vary strongly by both generation and region. The religion of older people, in particular, tends to be restricted to occasional attendance at religious services and adherence to traditional “national” customs and practices, especially in association with rites of passage such as baptism or circumcision, marriage and death. This must be distinguished from both the worldview of the middle-aged, which tends towards ideological nationalism and is still heavily influenced by the Soviet era, and the beliefs of recent converts, who are generally younger. Although religion plays virtually no role in the everyday lives of many people still influenced by the Soviet experience, these may still see it as an important aspect of their identity, especially in distinguishing themselves from their neighbours and fellow Caucasians. This also shines through in the platforms of most nationalist parties, which tend to ascribe religion with a central role in the definition of the nation, without, however, this having a bearing on their policies, i.e. without making them into “Christian” or “Islamic” parties. In the late 1980s, for example, the Ilia Chavchavadze Society fought its struggle for Georgian sovereignty under the slogan “Homeland, Language, Faith”.² The bulk of the population in each of the three South Caucasian republics can still be described as “culturally Christian” or “culturally Muslim”. They must be distinguished from young, religiously active Muslims, who explicitly distance themselves from their parents’ “false” understanding of their faiths and who give religion a central place in their lives. Religious institutions and organizations take their positions on the conflicts in the Caucasus according to which of these groups they draw their support from.

In the post-Soviet period, the Christian church organizations and the spiritual administrations of Muslims that existed in rudimentary form under Soviet rule have significantly increased their power, often with state support. Since these organizations – both churches and Islamic spiritual administrations – were not created from scratch but rather on the basis of Soviet or pre-Soviet institutions – sometimes even under the same leadership – they remain highly integrated with state structures, despite the existence of broadly secular constitutions. The political elites in each country realized quickly that they could use religion to stabilize their own hold on power. The fact that religious elites were morally compromised by their co-operation with Soviet structures, and the KGB in particular, was of little importance. For example, the Sheikh-ul-Islam of (South) Caucasian Muslims, Allahşükür Paşazadä, has had few problems remaining in the office he assumed in 1979 through half a dozen changes of government. Many other dignitaries in the Administration of Caucasian Muslims (*Qafqaz Müsülmanları İdarəsi*) have also held office continuously since late Soviet times. The situation is similar with regard to

2 Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Making of the Georgian Nation*, 2nd edition, Bloomington/Indianapolis 1994, p. 320.

the Christian churches of Georgia and Armenia, although the Georgian Church differs from the Armenian in having attracted dissidents such as Zviad Gamsakhurdia as early as the 1970s.³

The state continues to interfere with the internal concerns of religious communities on a massive scale. A particularly noteworthy example is the intervention of different Armenian governments in the elections of the Catholics of the Armenian Apostolic Church in 1995 and 1999. In both cases, the successful candidate owed his position in large part to state support.⁴

In general, governments and most political parties have no interest in the existence of independent social actors. For their part, the religious elites see close ties with the state apparatus as a means of securing better access to state funds and new opportunities to increase their influence.

The “Peacemaking Potential” of the Dominant Religions

Broadly speaking, there are two aspects to religion’s potential contribution to defusing conflicts in the Caucasus and creating lasting peace, and they should be considered separately: the role played by the dominant religion within each society, and the way each deals with the region’s interstate and inter-ethnic conflicts. As already mentioned, religion has taken on an important role in the formation of national identity in post-Soviet societies, i.e. it serves to delineate ethno-religious groups both within states and along state lines. For that reason, the potential of religion to create peace between states must be approached with great scepticism. This contrasts somewhat with the rhetoric of peace that religious leaders were encouraged to voice during the Soviet period, when their role within Soviet foreign policy was to call for “world peace”. Both the Christian churches and the Islamic religious administrations were instruments of Soviet foreign policy. They helped the USSR present an image to the world of a state in which freedom of religion was allowed, enabled an influence to be exerted on the various national diasporas, which was especially successful in the case of the Armenians,⁵ and – particu-

3 Cf. Suzanne Goldberg, *Pride of Small Nations. The Caucasus and Post-Soviet Disorder*, London/New Jersey 1994, p. 137.

4 Cf. Aschot L. Manutscharjan, Einführung in die Grundproblematik des Tschetschenienkonflikts [An Introduction to the Fundamental Issues in the Chechen Conflict], in: Ernest König/Erich Reiter (eds), *Parameter bewaffneter Konflikt. Die Kriege um das Kosovo 1998/99 und in Tschetschenien seit 1999 im Vergleich*. [Parameters of Armed Conflict. A Comparison of the War over Kosovo in 1998-99 and in Chechnya since 1999]. Studien und Berichte zur Sicherheitspolitik. Schriftenreihe der Landesverteidigungsakademie/ Büro für Sicherheitspolitik 4/2000, pp. 13f., at: www.bmlv.gv.at/pdf_pool/publikationen/manu01.pdf.

5 After the Second World War, the Armenian church was directly involved in the attempt of Stalin’s administration to win back the regions of Kars and Ardahan, which had been assigned to Turkey in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (1918). Cf. Ronald Grigor Suny, *Looking Toward Ararat. Armenia in Modern History*, Bloomington/Indianapolis 1993, pp. 166ff; Suny, cited above (Note 2), p. 285.

larly relevant for our purposes – the Communist Party leadership could make use of “its” religious dignitaries to influence the “struggle for world peace”. Soviet religious leaders represented Moscow’s foreign policy position at the World Council of Churches and in international Islamic and Christian organizations and interfaith meetings, thus strengthening the “anti-imperialist” (read anti-NATO) camp. The Armenian Apostolic and Georgian Orthodox Churches were officially accepted into the World Council of Churches as early as the summer of 1962, and Georgian Catholicos Ilia II even served as one of its presidents from 1979 to 1983. That the decision to join the World Council of Churches was not taken by the clergy itself is illustrated by the Georgian Church’s decision to leave in 1997 as a result of the Council’s alleged secularizing tendencies. Despite this, the tradition of peace rhetoric lives on to some extent thanks to these churches’ involvement in international religious organizations, as these tend to exert a certain pressure on religions to perform a role in defusing conflicts. Not without significance here are the activities of the Vatican under Pope John Paul II, who has repeatedly initiated and supported interfaith peace initiatives. The Pope visited all three South Caucasian states and, with the exception of Georgia, was cordially received by local religious dignitaries in each country.

This quasi-official foreign policy on the part of religions in the region is undermined by the continuing closeness of religious institutions to the state and the use made of them by various governments. This has led to religious leaders changing their positions according to political and foreign policy exigencies. Moreover, as the dominant religions have become indispensable elements of national identity and hence national discourse, they are unlikely to escape nationalistic instrumentalization – at least with regard to domestic policy. In Georgia, for example, membership of the autocephalic Georgian Church was – and to some extent continues to be – used to exclude Armenians and Muslims,⁶ and this has occasionally caused problems with the relationship to Ajaris, a majority of whom are ethnic Georgians of Muslim faith. Nevertheless, there are success stories: In the post-Soviet period, Catholicos Ilia II (in office since 1977) maintained a certain distance from the world of politics, thus going against the tendency of the Orthodox churches to retain close relations with the state (although this may be a result of Georgia’s complex political situation). He also opposed plans to “Georgify” an Armenian monument in Tbilisi and continued to refer to the Abkhaz and Ossetians as brothers even after the outbreak of hostilities.⁷

Because of state suppression of religion, the strict monitoring of religious activities, and the general anti-religious discourse in a predominantly secular society, the number of clergy in the Soviet Union was extremely small and their level of theological sophistication tended to be low. While the number of people employed in the administrative structures of the various

6 Cf. Suny, cited above (Note 2), p. 334.

7 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 401.

religions has exploded, their theological knowledge has not kept pace. This is one contributing reason why the clergy is unlikely to deliberately adopt and represent theologically well-grounded positions against nationalism, war, and the use of force that go beyond the level of platitudes. Were they to do so, they would come into conflict with their national governments and the nationalist-dominated political discourses of the majority populations. This would go against the clergy's interest in stabilizing their own domestic positions.

The Domestic Role of the Majority Religions

Although all three South Caucasian states have secular constitutions, the legal status of the majority religion varies from state to state. Here it is Georgia that differs from Armenia and Azerbaijan, in that the Georgian Orthodox Church is heavily favoured by that country's constitution. Following the amendment of 30 March 2001, Article 9 of Georgia's constitution reads as follows:

1. The state shall declare complete freedom of belief and religion, as well as shall recognise the special role of the Apostle Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia in the history of Georgia and its independence from the state.
2. The relations between the state of Georgia and the Apostle Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia shall be determined by the Constitutional Agreement. The Constitutional Agreement shall correspond completely to universally recognised principles and norms of international law, in particular, in the field of human rights and fundamental freedoms.⁸

The Constitutional Agreement between church and state was signed in October 2002 and has since been ratified by both parties. The very same article that declares the independence of the church from the state also declares that there is a close relationship between the two, resulting in a certain privileging of the majority faith.⁹ In contrast, the Armenian and Azerbaijani constitutions make no mention of the Armenian Apostolic Church and Islam, respectively.¹⁰

8 The Constitution of Georgia. Adopted on 24 August 1995, Changes and Amendments: 07/01/2004 N306-rs, at: <http://humanrights.ge/files/constitution.pdf>.

9 Cf. Levan Abashidze, *Das Recht der Religionsgemeinschaften in Georgien* [The Right of Religious Communities in Georgia], in: Wolfgang Lienemann/Hans-Richard Reuter (eds), *Das Recht der Religionsgemeinschaften in Mittel-, Ost- und Südosteuropa* [The Rights of Religious Communities in Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe], Baden-Baden 2004, p. 196.

10 See Article 23 of the Armenian and Article 18 of the Azerbaijani constitution.

The various bodies of law dealing with religions in each of the countries in the South Caucasus are of great importance for understanding the relationships between the state and religion, and between the majority religion and other faiths or dissident groups within the majority faith. In Georgia, however, no such law has been passed owing to deep differences of opinion between the various political camps on the role of the Orthodox Church and the rights of religious minorities. Some representatives of religious minorities would rather see this deadlock continue than have a law passed that they fear would place them in a disadvantaged position – as is indeed the wish of certain church leaders and politicians.

In a 1997 amendment to Armenia's law on religions, the Armenian Apostolic Church was declared the national church, and was thus granted privileged status despite the constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion. Consequently, the legal situation regarding religions in Armenia is comparable with that in Georgia, even if the Georgian constitution is more explicit in recognizing the majority faith. Since 1992, Armenian religious communities that want to be granted official recognition have had to possess "historically recognized holy scriptures". Nonetheless, with the exception of the Hare Krishna movement, which was refused accreditation for failing to have the required minimum of 200 adherents, all the religious organizations that have applied for recognition have so far been successful. In Armenia, it has proved difficult to agree a concordat between church and state, in no small part because of the need to find a solution to the sensitive question of the restoration of church property.

In Azerbaijan, by contrast, while the law on religions generally causes no problems for minority religions, it discriminates clearly against Islamic communities that are not willing to co-operate with the official Administration of Caucasian Muslims, whose approval is required before a congregation can be granted official status.¹¹ Between March and July 2004, a conflict arose during which this regulation was used as a pretext to drive a community out of its mosque in Baku's old town. The real cause of the affair is the fact that the congregation in question and their leader Hacı İlqar İbrahimoglu co-operated with the opposition Mūsavat party.¹² This is a further illustration of the problems that arise from the closeness of state and church organizations/spiritual administrations of Muslims.

The Azerbaijani law on religions discriminates least between faiths and is the only one that does not explicitly favour the majority religion.

Far more problematic than the legal framework – which generally guarantees all the rights and freedoms that also exist in the EU – are the applica-

11 On this, see: Raoul Motika, *Das Religionsrecht in Aserbajdschan* [The Law on Religions in Azerbaijan], in: Lienemann/Reuter, cited above (Note 9), p. 88.

12 For details of the most recent developments, see: Felix Corley, *Azerbaijan: Juma mosque stolen by police, community refused access for worship, and new imam imposed*, in: F18News, 2 July 2004, at: http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=354. Further information is available on the website of Forum 18 (www.forum18.org).

tion of the law and government policies with regard to religious groups that are considered undesirable. State institutions and the organizations of the majority religions in each country tend to collude in discriminating against so-called non-traditional religious communities. This affects adherents to evangelical Christian groups and the Jehovah's Witnesses, oppositional Islamic communities, the Baha'is and Hare Krishnas alike. The region's much fêted "traditional religious tolerance" thus vanishes rapidly when missionary activities are felt to challenge a majority religion's hegemonic position within its own ethno-religious group. In Azerbaijan, for instance, no one is bothered by the conversion of an ethnic Russian from Orthodoxy to Catholicism; but should an Azeri convert to Christianity, this will be publicly denounced as an act of national betrayal. If an Armenian's conversion to Islam were to become public knowledge in his or her homeland, the individual concerned would probably have to flee abroad. One of the most popular themes in the nationalist press and religious-nationalist circles generally is the "threat to national unity" posed by foreign missionaries. On the whole, the various religious establishments are directly responsible for escalating these fears, even if they themselves generally do not participate directly in acts of violence. In Georgia, the excommunicated Orthodox priest, Basili Mkalavishvili, became notorious as a result of his campaign of violence. Describing himself as the "guardian of Orthodoxy and of the Georgian people", he regularly roused his supporters to violent acts against Jehovah's Witnesses (38 cases in 2000 alone), Baptists, and interconfessional meetings. The evident toleration of his activities by the state security forces was outrageous.¹³ Equally troubling is the role played by the state in the restitution of church property belonging to Roman Catholic and Armenian Apostolic congregations, much of which has simply been handed over to the Georgian Orthodox Church.¹⁴ In all three states, it is difficult for religious minorities, especially congregations belonging to the so-called "non-traditional religions", to receive planning permission to build new places of worship. Nowhere have such plans received support from the majority religions.

In the South Caucasus, the missionary activities of foreigners are observed with extreme suspicion and face legal restrictions or even illicit state harassment.¹⁵ Both the laws themselves and the way they are applied contradict to some extent the obligations the three republics entered into on joining the Council of Europe. In Armenia and Georgia, where the national churches are seen as solely responsible for the survival of the Armenian and Georgian peoples during centuries of foreign rule, activities that could challenge the

13 Cf. Abashidze, cited above (Note 9), pp. 197f. See also an interview with the protestant bishop Gert Hummel in: Georgien News, 11 March 2002, at: http://www.erkonet.de/georgien-news/archive/issue_003_1103/interview/interview.htm.

14 Cf. Georgia – International Religious Freedom Report 2003, US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, at: <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2003/24358.htm>.

15 For details, see the Annual Reports on International Religious Freedom published by the US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, at: <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/irf>.

dominant role of the majority religions may be viewed as a threat to the nation itself. In Azerbaijan, Christian missionary activities in particular are rejected by most politicians and the Islamic religious hierarchy not only because of Islam's claim to dominance, but also because such activities are associated with the Armenian enemy. Missionary activities are always seen as aiming to undermine the nation's "will to fight". The prominence, during the transition process, of so-called "secondary" topics of political conflict, such as nation, ethnicity, and religion, is a result of the lack of significant socio-structural differences that would tend to lead to political actors pursuing platforms on the basis of genuine issues of "policy".

To summarize: at least as far as domestic matters are concerned, religions are by no means helping to defuse conflicts. Quite the opposite is true.

The Role of Religion in the Conflicts of the South Caucasus

As mentioned above, religion is a significant marker of difference between the various peoples in the region. Where conflicts involve unambiguous ethno-religious dividing lines, as between Azerbaijanis and Armenians, religion always plays a certain role. The idea of a Muslim Armenian is unthinkable to members of both groups, as is the thought of an Azerbaijani who is simultaneously a member of the Armenian Apostolic Church.¹⁶ That is not to suggest that the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh should be seen as a religious war, but merely that adherence to a particular religion plays an important role in the construction of the self and the act of distancing oneself from the enemy. This can clearly be seen in the use made of religious symbolism and the instrumentalization of religion in general during the recent clashes. Echoing in a way the peace rhetoric of the Soviet era, and sometimes on the initiative of foreign religious organizations, several official meetings were held during the war between the Catholicos and the Sheikh-ul-Islam. Armenian Catholicos Vazgen I was particularly active and sought in vain right up to his death in 1994 to mediate in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.¹⁷ At these meetings, it was frequently stressed that the war was not religious in nature and that efforts should be made to resolve it peacefully. But even relatively ineffectual calls for a peaceful settlement of the conflict, such as that made by the religious leaders of the South Caucasian states at the

16 In this regard, the case of the Uden of Vartashen (now Oguz) is interesting. They are a small Caucasian people settled in the north of Azerbaijan, who have probably belonged to the Armenian Apostolic Church since the 18th century and were driven from their homeland in the course of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict as a result. In this case, it was not ethnicity but religious affiliation (visible in the case of the Uden by the Armenian forms of their names) that was decisive. The Uden who remain in Azerbaijan have since founded their own "Albanian" church. I am grateful to Prof. Wolfgang Schulze of the University of Munich for his expert advice concerning the Uden.

17 Cf. Roland Götz/Uwe Halbach, *Politisches Lexikon GUS* [Political Handbook of the CIS], third (revised) edition, Munich 1996, p. 64.

founding of the CIS Interreligious Council in Moscow in March 2004, have met with heavy criticism at home. For example, the chairman of the State Committee for Relations with Religious Organizations, Rafik Aliev, disputes the right of the Sheikh-ul-Islam to make statements of a political nature, arguing that if he does speak on politics, then he should always represent the Azerbaijani interest.¹⁸ Religious leaders generally already do this as well as voicing peace rhetoric, as, for example, when the Sheikh-ul-Islam declares that “if it does not prove possible to find a just resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh problem by peaceful means, our people and our state are prepared to use all the means at our disposal to win back our territory”.¹⁹ It is hard to judge whether the religious differences between the parties would have come to play a greater role in the conflict had these meetings not taken place. In contrast, there is no known case of a religious leader opposing the war domestically, let alone actively supporting conscientious objectors.

On the international stage, neither conflict party has hesitated to play the religion card. The Armenians represented themselves to the USA, Western Europe, and the Christian world as persecuted Christians and called for solidarity among believers. Armenian propagandists, in a move analogous to that performed by proponents of “Greater Serbia”, argued that the Armenians were defending Christendom against Islamic aggression. They saw themselves surrounded by Muslim Turks, including the Azerbaijanis, hell-bent on annihilating the Armenian people just as in the Ottoman Empire in 1915. At the time, however, the Armenian president, Levon Ter-Petrossian, explicitly rejected the idea that the war was a matter of religion.²⁰

Azerbaijan also attempted to use religious arguments to gain the support of Muslims worldwide, for example, within the Organization of Islamic Conferences. Typical of this was the short-lived deployment of Afghani Mujahideen mercenaries against the Armenians. Fortunately, these attempts to instrumentalize religious sentiment proved largely unsuccessful, and religion has remained a minor theme in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to this day. Here, it is highly significant that, when dealing with the conflict in its neighbouring state, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been guided by its geopolitical and strategic interests and not by the religious belief it shares with Azerbaijan’s Shiite majority. Iran twice sought unsuccessfully to mediate in the conflict to its north and maintains good relations to Armenia to this day. Nor was any major player among the wider international community interested in a religious war. The main reason the war was not dominated by religious rhetoric was because religion plays a subordinate role in the types of nationalism that dominate in both Azerbaijan and Armenia – two countries that are, in any case, largely secularized.

18 Cf. *525-ci qāzet*, 6 March 2004.

19 *Bizim Āsr*, 26 July 2003 (author’s translation).

20 Cf. Goldberg, cited above (Note 3), p. 156.

In Georgia's two unresolved military conflicts – in Abkhazia and South Ossetia – religion plays an even smaller role, as both the Abkhaz, who are related to the Circassians and speak a similar language, and the Ossetians, who speak an Iranian tongue, practise a variety of religions. As well as Christian and Islamic beliefs, elements of nature religion are also widespread. Only small groups within these populations place any great importance on religion. Although the Muslim belief of most Abkhaz tends to be somewhat superficial, the level of identification with Islam has grown sharply among those who have lived for years in the Muslim societies of Turkey and the Middle East since migrating or fleeing to the Ottoman Empire during the Caucasian Wars of the 19th century. Returnees were often disappointed by the religious indifference of the “Soviet Abkhaz” and were able to persuade few of their fellows to practise their faith more actively. In the early 1990s, there was some co-operation between Chechen and other North Caucasian groups and Abkhaz fighters, but these were temporary tactical alliances and not based on religion. As was true of many nationalities in the former Soviet Union, Abkhazia experienced a degree of religious revival in the 1990s, affecting Christianity, Islam, and the region's nature religions. Attempts were made to instrumentalize all three faiths against the Georgian enemy. The following example of Abkhaz propaganda vividly illustrates this: “God was with us in the cruel war for our country against the Antichrist. Our Saviour helped us! Let us confirm our faith in him, pray for salvation and the strengthening of the Christian Church in Abkhazia.”²¹ The ambivalent role of religion in this conflict is also evident in the fact that, at the start of the war, the Georgians have attempted to portray – especially to the West – the Abkhaz as Muslim extremists, which is ironic given that the majority of Abkhaz are probably not Muslim but Christian. At present, religiously active Orthodox Christian Abkhaz appear to be severing their links with the Georgian Church and turning to Moscow. Nevertheless, it would so far not be true to say that religion has played a significant role in the conflict. Although transnational religious groupings such as the Jehovah's Witnesses are also seen as a threat within Abkhaz society and are therefore banned, this is not primarily an indication of religious fanaticism on the part of the population. It should rather be understood as a symptom of the fear on the part of the governments and official religious hierarchies, common to all Caucasian states, of any religious groups that are not under their control and which could conceivably pose a threat to “national unity” and the nation's “will to fight”. Jehovah's Witnesses are particularly affected in all the South Caucasian states and conflict regions.

Catholicos Ilia II of Georgia was the only church leader who dared to continue to refer to the Abkhaz and Ossetians as “brothers” following the

21 Cited in Rachel Clogg, Religion, in: George Hewitt (ed.), *The Abkhazians. A Handbook*, Richmond 1999, p. 215; for additional information on the role of religion in Abkhaz life, see *ibid.*, pp. 205-217.

outbreak of hostilities.²² Politically, however, the Georgian Church takes the side of the state and supports the reintegration of Abkhazia in the Georgian entity.²³

A potentially explosive issue concerns the repatriation of the Islamic, Turkic Meskhetians deported by Stalin during the Second World War, whose return to Georgia the Council of Europe declared in 1998 to be a condition for Georgia's accession. The areas in the south-west of the country where they formerly lived are now largely settled by Armenians and Ajaris. As far as I am aware, neither the Georgian Church nor the Armenian Apostolic Church are pursuing any initiatives that aim at a humanitarian solution. On the contrary, lower-level church officials frequently subscribe to the notion of an imaginary Islamic danger that would increase with the return of the Meskhetians.²⁴

Relations with the largely Muslim but ethnolinguistically Georgian Ajaris are equally problematic, with Christian nationalists believing that they should return to the fold of Christian Orthodoxy – their “ancestral religion”. The Georgian Church is currently carrying out a huge programme of missionary activity, which appears to have recently succeeded in making many converts to Orthodox Christianity.²⁵

Attempts at interreligious co-operation in the Caucasus have never progressed beyond the early stages. One initiative was the “Supreme Religious Council of the Caucasus Peoples”, which was convened in Grozny in 1992 and included representatives of all the “traditional” religious denominations of the region. It elected the Azerbaijani Sheikh-ul-Islam, Allahşükür Paşazadə, as chairman. Despite considerable optimism at its start, this forum soon had to be abandoned following the catastrophic escalation of the region's conflicts. Formally, the Council continues to exist and, on 28 July 2003, supposedly with the agreement of Christian and Jewish representatives, elected the Sheikh-ul-Islam chairman for life.²⁶ The only successful cross-border activities have remained within the bounds of a single religion, and indeed a single religious subgroup. A certain exception can be made for the Administration of Caucasian Muslims in Baku, which, although its influence in the North Caucasus is limited to the Dagestani (ethnically Azeri) Shiites, is at least nominally responsible for religious matters for both Sunni and Shiite Muslims in Georgia. In practice, however, this body has also proved largely ineffective. The extent to which the new CIS Interreligious Council, which was founded in Moscow in March 2004, can contribute to solving social and inter-ethnic conflicts cannot be predicted.

22 Cf. Manutscharjan, cited above (Note 4), p. 14.

23 For more information, see: <http://www.patriarchate.ge/ne/afxaziae.htm>.

24 Cf. Lela Inasaridze, Meskhetian Return Stirs Georgian Dissent, in: IWPR's Caucasus Reporting Service 163/2003.

25 For details, see Mathijs Pelkmans, Religion, Nation and State in Georgia: Christian Expansion in Muslim Ajaria, in: *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 22/2002, pp. 249-273.

26 Cf. *525-ci qāzet*, 30 July 2003.

The extent to which interreligious co-operation is loaded with conflict potential is shown by the successful protest on the part of the Georgian Church against the conclusion of a treaty between Georgia and the Vatican in September 2003, which would have improved the legal situation of the country's Catholics. Ilia II, the head of the Georgian Orthodox Church, made the following official declaration: "The Orthodox Church of Georgia is a traditional church having its historical merit. It is determined by the State Constitution and its equalizing to other confessions will provoke religious objections."²⁷

Perhaps precisely because of the tension between the Orthodox Church and the other religions in the country, Georgia appears to be the only country in which there is a certain degree of interfaith activity among the non-Orthodox denominations. Elsewhere, such activities are restricted to official meetings between the highest representatives of the "traditional" religious communities, largely at state-sponsored events. Nonetheless, it would be unrealistic to expect that interreligious dialogue and co-operation between religions would be a central concern of believers after years of repression.

Conclusions

In general, it can be concluded that the most important religious powers in the three states of the South Caucasus have so far played no independent role in the region's inter-ethnic and local conflicts and will not do so in the future. At best, they could contribute to *rapprochement* within the countries in transition, thus creating a more peaceful climate and increasing the acceptability of non-violent and compromise-oriented strategies for conflict resolution. Standing in the way of this, however, is the role of religion in nationalistic discourse, which makes antinationalism virtually unthinkable, especially in the case of the "national churches" of Armenia and Georgia. Among the region's Muslims, on the other hand, transnational tendencies argue in favour of their closer integration in the global Islamic community or – at least in the case of the Shiites – closer ties with Iran, something that is equally unlikely to improve the prospects of regional or domestic peacemaking efforts. A positive first step would be for the religious hierarchies in the countries in question to deal with both dissident voices within their own communities as well as so-called "non-traditional" religions with arguments instead of force, defamation, and calls for them to be outlawed.

27 Official statement of Ilia II at a press conference on 18 September 2003, at: <http://www.patriarchate.ge/ne/shetanx.htm>.