

INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN THE ERA OF GLOBALISATION: THE EXAMPLE OF AZERBAIJAN

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“And good and evil are not alike, repel evil with that which is best. And lo, he, between whom and thyself was enmity, will become as though he were a warm friend.”

(The Holy Qur'an, 41:35)

“Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.”

(Matthew, 5:9)

For centuries most tragic pages of the human history have been associated with religious conflicts, on the way to solve which people appealed to values of interfaith tolerance and principles of interreligious dialogue. Events of September the 11th once again emphasised the importance of raising public awareness in the need of the dialogue between cultures and religions. This dialogue will be especially crucial considering the fact that it will take place in conditions of currently on-going processes of globalisation. Deep-rooted crises preceding, accompanying and following collapse of the Soviet Union have been largely responsible for escalation of interethnic conflicts in post-Soviet space. In Transcaucasus conflicts between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Georgia and Abkhazia, Georgia and Southern Ossetia resulted in terrible violence and human lives' losses. However, the Transcaucasus region, besides being since perestroika one of the epicentres of interethnic instability, possesses enough potential of becoming in the future a place of more violent interreligious conflicts. The main reasons for this are multireligious composition of the region's population and poor economic conditions of its countries. In this regard Azerbaijan due to its rich history of

religious tolerance is of special importance in the era of globalisation, because it can serve as a model for all the countries of the region in the way to achieve interreligious dialogue and provide religious tolerance.

In today's scholarly literature a term "globalisation" appears frequently but with different meanings. Generally speaking, it refers to a complex of global processes, mainly of economic and technological nature, taking place world-wide in the recent decades and referred to most often as "a phenomenon of globalisation". Among the most important features of contemporary globalisation processes in the world disappearance of borders between cultures, nations, societies, and ethnic groups can be mentioned. On one hand, as it has been argued in scholarly literature, a phenomenon of globalisation possesses negative features. Some scholars make historical parallels between globalisation and colonisation, stating that in both of the cases dominant forces have been based in the West. Moreover, a phenomenon of globalisation has been a frequent target for protesters, who attribute to it violation of democratic rights, ecological damage and the loss of traditional jobs and cultural identity. The latter fact is particularly important since as a result of the globalisation different systems of values, which have been sustained and developed by a given culture; tend to be rendered meaningless or even irrelevant. As a result, globalisation poses a challenge as well to the ethnic culture contained within each nation. It frequently invades and transforms the forms of indigenous culture, which have been established by ethnic groups and nations. On the other hand, globalisation is credited with the positive features as well, a short list of which includes quick flow of information and capital, easier availability of various goods and services, frequency of international travels, cheap international communication with Internet at the top, etc. Here another classical definition of globalisation as historical process by which the world moves ever closer together comes to mind. As such, one of the most important positive features of globalisation is the fact that today different heterogeneous communities can be more co-operative,

considering the appearance in the recent time of diverse means of understanding each other.

Nobody will deny the fact that the ways in which information have been disseminated around the world over the past two decades changed drastically. Today we are living in the period, which can be deservedly called the “information age”. The influence of the “information age” can be observed, among other things, on example of such a phenomenon of the human civilisation as religion. New communications and information technologies (IT) help to disseminate both knowledge about a religion and religious knowledge world-wide. It is now possible for any religion to spread beyond the national borders. All of this is resulting in a process, which can be termed as “globalisation of religion”. The phenomenon of globalisation of religion has made it easier to transfer the all-embracing message of any religion all over the world. As a result, societies are becoming less exclusive and more multi-religious. Social reality forces world religious communities to get rid off their exclusive attitudes and to develop some universal orientations, which should be more accommodating to the other. In these conditions various forms of interreligious dialogue shall have crucial importance.

A phenomenon of globalisation as the one opting for unification and breaking the borders between the people is not new in the history. It was religion that first espoused the idea of the oneness of humankind, though basically a religious vision of the unity of humanity differs from that of globalisation. Today world religions have been challenged by globalisation. Thanks to the latter religious communities realised the necessity of common dialogue and efforts in achieving mutual respect. Modern religious leaders are concerned with these problems and call for interreligious dialogue among the world religions. According to Dalai Lama, for instance: “... *It is necessary to use more energy in making sure that all big world religions are using human potential for the best of humanity - to serve humanity and to save the planet - while we make simultaneous attempts to solve the*

conflicts which are causing struggles in the name of religion".¹ Indeed, contemporary religious conflicts happen mainly because of the inability or lack of wish from the side of religious leaders to build bridges among their communities for greater understanding. However, any process of peace can be opened up only by dialogue. The dialogue between religions may lead to mutual inspiration, creativity and co-operation across any imaginable borders. Today, as never before in the history, spiritual dialogue between religions, organisations, groups, and individuals is a key to the peaceful solutions of different religious conflicts around the world. The world is suffering from a widespread absence of true conversation and willingness to understand each other. In this situation a reference to historical examples of religious tolerance and mutual respect in the local contexts would be important.

Processes of globalisation that take place in contemporary world are of not less concern to Azerbaijan than to any other country. Despite difficult collisions of its history, Azerbaijan has been known for long as a heterogeneous country, where representatives of many religions co-existed peacefully. This fact has been mentioned already by the Pope John II during his visit to Azerbaijan in May 2002, referring to Azerbaijan as a "*country, which has held and still holds tolerance as a primary value of all wholesome life in society*".² Indeed, historically representatives of Muslim, Christian and Jewish communities formed a uniform multireligious and tolerable body of Azerbaijani society. Today, on the wake of religious revival in Azerbaijan, along with mosques, a number of which has been growing extensively since the "perestroika", there are five Russian Orthodox churches, three Armenian churches, four Georgian Orthodox churches, thirteen Molokan (Russian old-traditionalists) churches, one Catholic church, one Protestant church, five Jewish synagogues, one Krishna temple-society and one Bahai society in the country.³ A number of Islamic, Christian and Jewish establishments for spiritual education active in Azerbaijan includes: Islamic University of Baku, faculties of theology at Baku State University and Qafqaz University, several

madrasas, Sunday schools attached to Christian Orthodox churches, Pentecostal Bible courses, the Bible school of the “Saving Grace International Protestant Christian Association”, etc. Classes have also been started at the school no. 46 in Baku for the study of Hebrew, Judaism, Jewish culture and history. National and religious occasions of all the religious confessions are widely celebrated in Azerbaijan and the President of the country publicly extends his greetings once a year to each of them. Evidence of the atmosphere of mutual respect between the religious confessions can be seen in their active participation on an equal basis in the life of Azerbaijani society. The historical absence of anti-Semitic moods in Azerbaijan should be particularly stressed. According to Israeli Ambassador to Azerbaijan Ethan Na’e: *“The tolerance of a country can be measured by its tolerance for its Jewish community. There is very high tolerance of Jews here, and no anti-Semitism. One could not wish for better treatment of Jews in a Moslem country than exists here in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan has reason to be proud of its relations with its Jews and other minorities”*.⁴

Religious confessions active in Azerbaijan maintain close links with their spiritual centres in different countries and participate actively in international events. Thus, the Board of Muslims of Caucasus (BMC) has established friendly relations with the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) as well as with different Islamic religious centres abroad. The Dean of the Russian Orthodox Church keeps constant contacts with the Christian Orthodox centres functioning in CIS countries. The Jewish synagogues have wide-ranging contacts with the Jewish communities all over the world. A number of religious confessions and non-traditional religious groupings in Azerbaijan engage in the active charitable work in the republic. They support many organisations and societies, providing to them humanitarian assistance. They are also active in extending material and moral assistance to various schools, homes for the disabled, homes of kids, hospitals and prisons.

Considering all of the mentioned above, Azerbaijan can play two important roles in the region. Firstly, it can serve as a bridge between the West and the East, the fact that has been emphasised by the Pope John II in his address at the arrival ceremony to Azerbaijan: “*Azerbaijan is a gateway between East and West: for this reason it not only enjoys considerable strategic importance, but also a symbol value of openness and exchange, which, if fostered by all parties, can ensure a particularly prominent role for the Azeri nation*”.⁵ Secondly, Azerbaijan can serve as a model of the country with rich traditions of religious tolerance. The latter fact has been confirmed by conclusions arrived at the International OSCE Conference called “The Role of Religion and Belief in a Democratic Society: Searching for ways to Combat Terrorism and Extremism”⁶ that was held in November 2002 in Baku. The final resolution of this conference emphasised, among other things, that “*diverse, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural societies are an essential and invaluable achievement of civilization and contribute to peace and strengthen relations between nations*”.⁷ Azerbaijani society is no doubt one of such societies and its example can be of utmost importance for the stable and peaceful future of the entire Transcaucasus region.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Dalai Lama, *Transforming the Mind. Teachings on Generating Compassion* (London: Thorsons, 2000), p. 159.
2. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2002/may/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20020522_world-culture-azerbaijan_en.html
3. <http://www.president.az>, <http://www.keston.org/020409AZ.htm>
4. <http://www.internationalreports.com/ciscentralasia/01/azerbaijan/israeliambassador.html>
5. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2002/may/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20020522_arrival-azerbaijan_en.html
6. http://www.osce.org/odihr/documents/freedom_of_religion/baku2002_concl.php3
7. Ibid.

Х ц л а с я

ГЛОБАЛЛАШМА ЕРАСЫНДА ДИНЛЯРАРАСЫ ДИАЛОГ: АЗЯРБАЙЪАНЫН ТИМСАЛЫНДА

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Ясрляр бойунъа дини мцнагишыляр бяшыриййятин ян фялакятли щадисляриня сябъа олмушдур. Она эюря дя, дцнйаны беля фябиялярдян хилас етмяк йолундакы ясас аддымлардан бири динляр арасында толерантлыьын (бир-бириня гаршы дюзцмлцццццц) бяргярар едилмяси вя динлярарасы диалогун гурулмасыдыр. 11 Сентйабр щадисляри бир даща иътимаи щцурда мядяниййятляр вя динлярарасы диалогун гурулмасына олан ещтийаьы эюстярди. Бу хцсусия глобаллашан дцнйа цццн чох ваьибдир, чцнки глобаллашан дцнйада ьямиййятляр, миллятляр вя динляр арасындакы сящядляр йумшалмагда вя онлар арасында гаршылыглы ялагяляр инкишаф етмякядир.

Бу мягалядя мцяллиф Азярбайъанын тимсалында динлярарасы диалогун вя дини толерантлыьын уьурларындан вя ьямиййятя эятирдийи хош абы-щавадан бящс едир вя бунун тарихи, иътимаи, мядяни кюклярини арашдыыр.