

UDC 101

QUESTION ON THE DOMINANT RELIGION IN MODERN ABKHAZIA***O. Zdorovtseva***

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This study aims to show that Christianity is neither traditional nor dominant religion of Abkhazia in spite of the current official position of the state power and religious identity of the population in this issue. Objectives: 1) to show on the basis of historical and statistical data that in Abkhazia at the beginning of the twentieth century the Orthodoxy prevailed nominally and not really because of the actual Islamization of the population; 2) to show that modern statistics in relation to Orthodoxy as formal as in the early twentieth century due to the fact that the Abkhazians follow the Abkhaz traditional religion.

According to the Statistical Yearbook of Russia of 1913 the Orthodox Christians in Abkhazia were in the majority – 85,14 %, Muslims – 11,12 %. Archival data only thirty-two years ago suggests the opposite: in Sukhumi, the Bzyb and Anguish administrative districts the proportion of Mohammedans was 85,48% of the entire population, that exceeded the number of Orthodox more than 70%, and in the whole province persons of the Muslim faith were in dominate. The data of the Statistical Yearbook, probably, have been achieved in the short time due to the quantitative extension of the number of formally baptized residents, essentially remaining “in their opinion” religion.

According to the 1897 census the majority of the population in Abkhazia were peasants – 848 persons per 1000 (for comparison students consisted of 64,1 people per 1000 people), the clergy – 23 281, 3 people in the whole province (+10 582,41 people engaged in worship and service in the liturgical buildings). A large part of the population of the province was the local peoples – Kartveli (Abkhazians, Mergels) – 82,1 % – the adherents of the Abkhaz traditional religion. The national and the social composition of the territory, the status of the literacy of the population show the formality of the statistical data of the Orthodox in the pre-revolutionary period.

The current state of Abkhazia's attitude to religion can be described as ambiguous. According to the opinion polls of 2003, 60% of Abkhazia's population identify themselves as Orthodox Christians. However the Abkhazians are formal Christians: “the Abkhazians-Christians” do not attend churches (or attend them very rarely), do not participate in the sacrament of communion, do not comply with any of the posts, do not interested in the basic beliefs, and do not read the Bible. About 50% of the Abkhazians, who called themselves Christians, have traditional shrines and perform their own rituals which have nothing to do with Christianity.

The local religion is actively reviving in Abkhazia over the last 20-25 years. The modern researchers characterize it as “Abkhazian monotheism”. The commitment to their tradition faith the Abkhazians had preserved throughout the Soviet period. Despite the fact that the Abkhazian authorities are trying to demonstrate the equality of all religions, attaching the corresponding provision in the Constitution of 1994, the representatives of the current leadership of Abkhazia, are the obligatory participants in religious ceremonies annually performed in the main Abkhazian sanctuaries (Dydrypsh, etc.). In the current post-Soviet reality the traditional religion of the Abkhazians plays a crucial stabilizing role in the society, it is claimed and, in fact, continues to be the true religion the majority of the Abkhazians. Thus, Orthodoxy in Abkhazia is neither traditional or really the dominant religion in a number of historical and national peculiarities of this state, and the official point of view on this issue is contrary to the actual religious situation.

Key words: Abkhazia, Orthodoxy, Christianity, the traditional religion of Abkhazians, Abkhazian monotheism, the religiosity self-identification.

“Abkhazia – a dream country, country of Orthodoxy”, “Orthodox Abkhazia”, “Abkhazian dissenters” – such and similar headings can be seen in Russian internet on request “How many orthodox Christians are in Abkhazia today?” There is no a concrete answer to this question. There are data of more than 10 years ago according to the question of Abkhazian population distribution to confessions and also many articles, dedicated to the problems of Abkhazian Orthodox Church unacknowledged autonomy and its fight for legality and canonicity with Abkhazia Sacred Metropolitanate. Leaving aside political conflicts (and they are exactly such), one will try to understand, what are circumstances at the “orthodox front” of this south republic, and mainly: does the orthodox really play the role for the Abkhazian population, which is ascribed by both opposing forces.

The aim of the article – show that Orthodoxy is appeared to be neither traditional, nor dominant religion of Abkhazia.

Challenges:

- 1) to show basing on historical and statistical data that Orthodoxy predominated nominally, but not really, in connection with actual population Islamization in Abkhazia in the beginning of XX century;
- 2) to show that the modern statistics in relation to Orthodoxy also so formal, as in the beginning of XX century in connection with that Abkhazian people are practically adherers of traditional Abkhazian religion.

Statistical annual in Russia for 1913 contains much useful information, analyzing which one can draw conclusion about how the deals were with religion in Abkhazia in pre-revolutionary period. In this time there was no republic of Abkhazia, its territory entered into Sukhumi district (with the administrative centre in Sukhumi). And in 1897 (when there was the first population census, which data are fixed in the pointed annual) this district in its turn entered into the structure of Kutaisi and Batumi province. One uses this specification, as some data, given lower are only throughout the province, and some in the district. The given moment decrease the accuracy, but in whole, by means of low population density at the whole territory (only 26 people per 1sq. verst under the space about 6 thous.sq.verst [5, p.52]), does not break the general picture in relation of religion.

Numerical strength of the whole Kutaisi province in the indicated period was more than a 1 mln.of people. (in 1897 – 1 058 241 thous.of people.[2], Sukhumi district – 106 179 people.[1], in 1913 – 1,045,4 thous.of people. [5, p.118], Sukhumi district – from 120,2 thous.[5, p.118] to 140,6 thous.[5, p.52]. According to the census official data orthodox christians composed the great majority in the province –85,14 %, after them were Muslims – 11,12 % [5, p.70]. However historical data of thirty two years ago testify about the opposite: in Sukhumi, Bzybsk and Abzhuisk administrative districts the part of Mahometan compoused 85,48% from the whole number of population, that exceeded the numerical strength of orthodox Christians more than on 70% [7, p. 15], and in whole in the province people of Muslim confession predominated. There are historical reasons for this: Islam got the wide spread in Abkhazia under the influence of neighboring Turkey during several centuries, beginning from the end of XVI c.; “Turkish mullahs were also doctors, and judges, and counsellors” [7, p.14] in pre-revolutionary Abkhazia.

Religion turns to traditional elements of culture and could not so sharply altered less than for one generation. Other data of this annual testify in favor of this. Local nations –

kartvelians (the Georgians, Abkhazians, Megrelians) – 82,1 %, some mountaineers 5,7%, the Armenians – 2,3%, Russians 1,8%, the Greeks – 1,4% composed the most part of the province population [5, p.64]. There is the same picture in Sukhumi district – kartvelians are the most part (79,4%), from them 55,3% – Abkhazians [1]. If Georgians, Armenians, and Greeks – traditionally orthodox, then Abkhazians, despite on the pointed adherence to Islamism, perceived it together with their national religion (one will speak about it later): “heathen religion stays to be the dominant in Abkhazia, and the main part of population unfortunately belongs to it”. Christians and Mahometans, without knowing religion dogmas, excepting few people, are also stricken with heathen superstition, confused their ceremonies with heathen actions and generally have the most shaky and deformed idea about God” [7, p.14, quot. according to: About Abkhazia position in the religious relation // Caucasus. 1868. No 5].

Where do the census data of 1897 come from according to orthodox confession? Most probably in connection with political ambitions of Russia, after joining of Abkhazia to Russian Empire, “general” Christianization of population began in the country through the activity of the Orthodox Christianity society recovery established in 1860 in Caucasus by Alexander the I. It is possible to suppose that the specified data were achieved in unreally short terms by means of quantitative number increase of officially baptized inhabitants, essentially stayed “under their” confession. Clergy paucity of Abkhazia testifies about that the Christianity essence stayed for the majority unachieved – 23 281, 3 of people for all province (+10 582,41 of people, occupied in divine service and service under liturgical buildings [5, p.86]), on the basis of 22 of people. per 1000 people, inhabitants according to the census of 1897 [5, p.118]. For comparison and specification: peasant comprised 848 of people. per 1000 of people. [5, p.118], and all students in the province – 64,1 of people. per 1000 of people. [5, p.118], that confirms illiteracy of the major part of population, occupied with agriculture.

Thus, national and social territory composition, literacy condition, make to think about statistical data formality of orthodox Christians in pre-revolutionary period. Abkhazia modern state towards religion, can be characterized as a complex one. The latest field studies according to this question were conducted in 1994-2000 under the direction of Krylov A.B., research assistant of Institute of orientalism RAS. The local Abkhazia history scientists confirm their data, particularly academician Kuprava A.E., c.h.s. R.V. Katsiya. According to surveys of 2003 60% of Abkhazia population reckoned themselves among orthodox Christians [4]. Twenty one orthodox temples act at the territory of republic, where 20 priests serve [7, p. 21-22]. Also there is one monastery in New Athos, dedicated to Christianity preacher in this country – apostle Simon Kananaios, established in the end of XIX century by Russian monks from Athos. Several monks headed by abbot live in the monastery.

However, national and social composition of Abkhazia brings into a question “Orthodoxy” authenticity of most part of its inhabitants. Abkhazians 1,7 % – megrelians, i. e. local nations composed 44,7% of the country numerical strength in 2009 [7, c.27]. From 240 thousand of population practically the part – 49,7% – are inhabitants of rural districts [7, p.28]. Belonging to Christianity is formal for Abkhazians: “Christians-Abkhazians” do not visit churches (or visit them extremely rare), do not officiate communion, do not keep fasts,

are not interested in the basis of beliefs, do not read Bible [3]. About 50% of Abkhazians [3], called themselves as Christians, have traditional sanctuaries and perform the ceremonies, having nothing in common with Christians.

The last 20-25 years the local religion, which local researchers characterize as “Abkhazian monotheism” is actively regenerating [3]. Abkhazians believe in one god – Antseya. The God has apaimbars – angels, the highest creatures, servants and representatives of the God on Earth, who report the God about everything that happens. Dydrypsh is the most worship among apaimbars. There were seven sanctuaries in Abkhazia according to the number of angels, but today only five of them act. Also every generation of Abkhazians has its own family sanctuary, where family prayings about help and welfare are accomplished and also sacrifices are made, similar to sacrifices of Old Testament. Prayings are realized by sacrificers –people from the certain sacerdotal families. Prayings in the main sanctuaries are dedicated accordingly to the problems of global scope – about harvest, victory in war and etc. Besides, prayings always include requests about remission of sins.

Abkhazians preserve adherence to their belief through the whole Soviet period, and today the most part of them not just pay a tribute to: they for a long time prayed for the sin of retreat from it, committed by ancestors in 30-s of XX century (in 1998 Krylov A.B. was present at one of such ceremonies in Dydrypsh sanctuary) “The “Representatives of the modern direction of Abkhazia always take part in grateful prayings for intercession and support in Georgia-Abkhazia war. The prayings are conducted in sanctuary Dydrypsh every year. The ceremonies in other sanctuaries are also adapted to the anniversary of victory over the Georgian army” [3]. However, Abkhazian powers strive to demonstrate equality of all religions: “president and high officials are certainly present at all solemn events, services and prayings, conducted by various religious communities” [3]. Abkhazia constitution in 1994 proclaims freedom of conscience and freedom of belief. Generally, Abkhazians are do not have religious bigotry: “the part of them perceive prayings in traditional sanctuaries not as cultic ceremony, but as tradition, coming from ancestors, as national holiday and a worthy reason for tableful so loved by many people” [3].

In the existing post-Soviet reality traditional religion of Abkhazians plays significant stabilizing role in the society, contributes to psychological rehabilitation of people, experienced hard war stress. That is why it is in demand and in fact continues to be the genuine religion of the most part of Abkhazians. Thus, Orthodoxy in Abkhazia is neither traditional, nor really dominating religion in virtue of a row of historical and national peculiarities of this small south government.

And there are no serious foundations to consider that the basic reason of such situation is in that “the position towards unacknowledged republic of Russian Orthodox Church...was based on political calculations” [3]. Though the problem of canonical belonging of existing in Abkhazia orthodox parishes and Simon- Kananaios monastery is strained and actually appeared to be politically provoked misunderstanding. Meanwhile, according to Abkhazian philosopher Oleg Danenia “the deficit of full church life is felt more critical” [6] in Abkhazian society. But this problem which is apparently expecting to be solved for society and lead of Abkhazia.

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