Chapter 14. Religion[1]

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An Abkhaz historian (Stanislav Lak'oba), when asked recently about the religion of Abkhazia, answered that the Abkhaz are eighty percent Christian, twenty percent [Sunni] Muslim, and one hundred percent pagan! While this was said partly in jest, it hints at an underlying truth. As Neal Ascherson (1995.249-250) recently observed: 'Trees matter to Abkhazians. Their two conversions to world religions, to Christianity in the sixth century and then to Islam under the Turks, have been less enduring than older ways of reverence for natural objects and for the dead.' There are few census-data, and estimates of religious affiliation vary from twenty percent Muslim at the lower end of the scale to upwards of forty at the upper end, leaving Christians the remaining majority. The ambiguity of numbers reflects a wider ambiguity; the Abkhaz would generally define themselves as either Christian or Muslim, yet this designation indicates little in terms of religious practice or belief. Very few Abkhaz Christians are churchgoers, few Abkhaz Muslims follow the practice of circumcision or daily prayers, obey Muslim dress-codes, or have ever seen a Koran.

Religious practice in Abkhazia, however, is hardly 'pagan' in a traditional sense. It is rather a complex synthesis involving aspects of polytheistic worship and animism, which has evolved over time to include aspects of the two world religions with which the Abkhaz have come into contact. Over the centuries, a 'peculiar mosaic of fragments of religious beliefs' has developed, in which 'Christian ceremonies, Moslem rites and pagan observances are so closely interwoven that at times it seems almost impossible to separate them' (Benet 1974.92). Much of the social ritual of the Abkhaz has its roots in religious belief or superstition, and gatherings of the extended family, weddings, funerals, memorial services, and festivals sometimes still involve making sacrificial offerings. In this sense the Abkhaz approach toward religion is fairly homogenous, and its ritual and custom is an important part of a collective identity. Yet the Abkhaz lack any sense of exclusive dogma or fundamentalism; individual religious difference is respected, and belonging to different denominations is seldom a reason for antagonism. Indeed, it is not uncommon to find both Christians and Muslims in one family[2].

Tolerance of, and to a certain extent assimilation to, religious beliefs and practices from outside, have been largely due to the Abkhaz lack of interest in the theology or dogma of either Christianity and Islam. Neither of these has been perceived as threatening to the social structure or daily practice of the Abkhaz, who have retained

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[1]This chapter focuses primarily on the religious practices of the Abkhazians in Abkhazia.

[2]Inal-Ipa (1965.374) and interview with Batal K'obakhia, Sukhum, March 1997.

many elements of pre-Christian belief and practice, and adapted new practices to them. As the American anthropologist Paula Garb has said, '...in reality, the Abkhaz have never related seriously to either Christianity or Islam. They have stubbornly preserved their pagan customs, adopting from Christianity or Islam only those elements which did not contradict their ancient beliefs' (1986.24). The predominance of Christian or Muslim practices among the Abkhaz at different times, then, has been more a case of expediency than of 'conversion', an acceptance of religion as part of the politics of imperial power. Abkhazia officially adopted Christianity in the VIth century when the region formed part of the Byzantine Empire, and the primacy of Christianity continued through the Middle Ages before giving way to Islam and the Ottoman empire in the XVth-XVIth centuries. As the Turkish influence declined and Abkhazia became a protectorate of Russia in the early XIXth century, Christianity again came to the fore, before the Soviet period and the repression of explicit religious practice.

Christianity

The apostles Andrew and Simon the Canaanite are said by some, on the basis of interpretations of the lives of the Saints, to have first spread the word of Christianity in Abkhazia in the Ist century. There is more concrete evidence for the advent of Christianity in the IVth century, however, when the first community of Christians in the Caucasus came into being in Pitiunt[3], made up of Christian martyrs exiled to Abkhazia by the Roman Emperor. In 325 the bishop of Pitiunt, Stratophil, represented this community at the first œcumenical council of the Christian Fathers at Nicea (Chachkhalia 1994.24-25). The oldest churches in Abkhazia date from the IVth-Vth centuries and are located in the Pitiunt area, also the site of the first bishopric in Abkhazia (Lakoba (ed.) 1993.64). The VIth century saw the expansion of the religious and political influence of Byzantium in Abkhazia. During the first half of the VIth century, church-building and proselytising increased; the Abkhazian prophet and missionary Efrat was sent back to spread the word of Christianity in his country by the Byzantine Emperor Justinian I; archbishoprics were established in both Pitiunt and Anakopia; and Orthodox Christianity was declared the official religion of Abkhazia.

The adoption of Christian beliefs and rituals by the population was gradual and not without resistance, yet the Christian presence in Abkhazia continued to grow. Toward the end of the VIIIth century the church in Abkhazia gained independence from Byzantium, and was represented at the council of Chalcedon as autocephalous (1994.7). The Abkhazian church underwent many changes in the tenth century, as the influence of the Greek church waned and that of the Georgian rose. An independent

[3]Now generally known as Pitsunda.

Western Georgian Catholicos(ate) took shape in the second half of the tenth century and began to forge closer links with the Eastern Georgian Church. This led to their eventual union under the one Catholicos in Mtskheta.

This change in influence led to a gradual shift away from the use of Greek to Georgian for religious writings and services. Georgian inscriptions in eastern regions of Abkhazia have been dated to the IXth century, though further west there is no evidence for the use of Georgian before the end of the tenth century (Lakoba (ed.) 1993.89). Greek continued to be used, though it became increasingly rare. Sources maintain that there were services still held primarily in Greek, though with some Abkhazian, in the XIth century (Smyr 1994.8), and inscriptions in Greek dating to the XIVth and XVIth centuries were found in the Lykhny church and Pitsunda cathedral respectively (Lakoba (ed.) 1993.116). Another major development of the Xth century was the significant development of Abkhazian church architecture, most likely under the ruler Giorgi II. Many new churches were built, including those in Pitsunda, Lykhny, Alakhadzy, Bzyp, Msygkh^{W}a, Psyrtskha, Arkhyz, and Shoana. These were followed by the outstanding Myk^{W} church, built in 966 under Leon III.

The Pitsunda church grew in prominence from the end of the XIIIth century to become the ecclesiastical centre of western Georgia and the western Caucasus. From 1390 Pitsunda had a separate Patriarch, the first of whom was Arsen, who had responsibility for Abkhazia, Mingrelia, Imereti(a), Svaneti(a) and Guria. It was in the XIVth and early XVth centuries that the influence of Christianity was most widespread among the population in Abkhazia. Many smaller churches were built, older ones renovated, frescoes painted, and the Ts'ebelda monastery founded.

<u>Sunni Islam</u>

The first contact the Abkhaz had with Islam was through Arab raiders, from the VIIIth century on, and sources first mention Muslim inhabitants in Sevastopolis[4] in the XIVth century. From 1451 repeated attempts were made by the Turks to win power in Abkhazia, until eventually they consolidated their hold along the coast. An official representative of the Turks settled in Sukhum in 1578, and Abkhazia became a protectorate of the Ottoman empire. In the same year a flag was introduced in Abkhazia bearing Islamic symbols (Smyr 1994.10). It was with this strengthening of Ottoman influence in the XVIth-XVIIth centuries that the gradual dissemination of Sunni Islam really began. This was a period of dramatic decline for Christian culture in Abkhazia, although in the early XVIIth century the Abkhaz were still paying the 'kharadzh', a duty paid to the Ottoman empire by non-Muslim subjects (Chachkhalia 1994.25, col. 3). Many Christian priests were banished, and eventually, in the mid-

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[4]Present day Sukhum.

XVIIth century, the Abkhazian Catholicos was transfered from Pitsunda further east to Gelati in Imereti(a).

The first evidence of Abkhazian Muslims was given in the 1640s by the Turkish historian Evliya Çelebi, whose mother was an Abkhazian. On his travels he recorded that the Abkhazians had a mosque and that among them were 'many Muslims'. This Muslim population, according to Çelebi, was hostile to Christians, in spite of not recognising the Koran or being of any religious denomination. Other sources would seem to indicate, however, that although the Christian presence was on the wane, and the dissemination of Islam increasing, evidence of traditional Islam was more apparent among the higher levels of society by the end of the XVIIIth century than among the population at large. The Abkhaz rulers were not in a position to decline Islam, a fact witnessed by the forced conversion of Shervashidze-Chachba, Abkhazia's ruling prince, to Islam in 1733, following the destruction by the Turks of Elyr, a pilgrimage-site of particular religious significance to the Abkhaz near Ochamchira.

Those Abkhazians who did identify themselves as Muslims interpreted Islam rather freely, adding it to the conglomerate of Christian and pagan belief, in the same way that Christianity had been adapted to encompass aspects of pagan ritual. Abkhazian Muslims were relaxed about the behavioural codes of Islam; most would drink wine, many continued to eat pork. They were known to practise many of the pagan rituals, to celebrate Christmas, Easter and other Christian festivals as well as Bairam, and to fast both for Ramadan and Lent (Tornau, quoted in Inal-Ipa 1965.374). Among the population of Abkhazia as a whole there was continued evidence of the practice of rituals pertaining to Christian worship when Abkhazia came under Russian protection in 1810. For example, each extended family, regardless of its religious persuasion, customarily made an annual sacrifice to Saint George (Ilorskij), most often on the first day of Easter, otherwise on any other sacred day throughout the summer (Zvanba 1955.56).

The second wave of Christianity

The shift in imperial influence after 1810 signalled a corresponding shift in religious attitude, the pendulum swinging back in favour of Christian Orthodoxy. The question of religion was even a condition of the protectorate, wherein the Abkhazian ruler agreed to resume the 'creed of our former faith' (Smyr 1994.12, quoting *Akty sobrannye Kavkazskoj arkheologicheskoj komissiej (AKAK)*, vol. III, p. 209, no. 375). The Tsarist government set about reviving Christianity in Abkhazia, reopening the churches, none of which was in use by this time. In 1815 the ruler of the Abzhywa region of Abkhazia, Ali-bey Chachba, a Muslim by birth, converted to Christianity (thus becoming Aleksandr Chachba), and in 1831 the Abkhaz ruler Mikhail Chachba

spoke of the importance of establishing a Christian mission in Abkhazia (Chachkhalia 1994.25, col.3). In 1851 an Abkhazian diocese was established, and in 1860 the Myk^{W} Cathedral was repaired and restored, and a 'Society for the restoration of Orthodox Christianity in the Caucasus (OVPKHK)' was set up.

Following the Crimean War of 1853-56, Tsarist government treatment of the Muslims in Abkhazia became harsh; the practice of Islam was prohibited, as was the holding of Islamic burials, and Abkhaz Muslims were forbidden to marry Christians. Mullahs and mosques were banned, and some jobs were restricted to non-Muslims. The population as a whole was encouraged to be baptised; privileges were often bestowed upon those who complied, others who did not were sometimes forcibly baptised. Missionaries of the OVPKHK alone are said to have baptised 21,336 people between 1860 and 1877 (Smyr 1994.13, quoting *Obzor dejatel'nosti OVPKHK za 1860-1910*, (Tiflis, 1910), pp. 172-173). Following the Tsarist annexation of the Caucasus, after the end of the Great Caucasian War in 1864, many Abkhazians fled their country. They were partly lured away by false promises of better treatment by the Ottoman Empire. Yet predominantly they left in fear of the Russians, a justifiable fear according to a British diplomat at the time: 'Most of [the Abkhaz] have been plundered of everything by the Russians before embarking...' (Henze 1992.103-104, quoting Palgrave). Although a sense of religious affiliation with the Turks may have been a motivating factor for some, the event of the *maxadzhirstvo* also served further to Islamicise many of the exiled Abkhaz. The territory which was left vacant by the Abkhaz was settled by Mingrelians, Russians and Armenians among others, another factor in the consolidation of Christianity in Abkhazia.

The programme of Christian revival continued, with the restoration of former churches and monasteries, and the foundation in 1875 of the New Athos Monastery, named after Mount Athos in Greece. Priests and translators from among the Abkhaz were prepared, the translation of church literature into Abkhaz began, and the first history of the church in Abkhazia was written in 1885 by the Russian archimandrite Leonid (Kavelin). In 1892, 'The Ten Commandments and Ceremonial Oath' and 'A Short Holy History' were the first ecclesiastical literature to be printed in Abkhaz. In 1907, the first services were held in Abkhaz since the decline of Christianity centuries before (Chachkhalia 1994a.26). Academician N.Marr, however, was doubtful as to the success of the Russian Orthodox clergy in Abkhazia, who could 'be more proud of their building of architectural monuments than of their building of religion in the souls of the Abkhaz' (Smyr 1994.14, quoting Basarija 1923.53).

Religion in Soviet times

In 1918, Abkhazia came under the control of the short-lived independent Georgian Menshevik government. The Georgian Mensheviks introduced a series of

discriminatory policies towards non-Kartvelians. The discrimination extended to religious practice; almost all ecclesiastical literature in the Abkhaz language was destroyed, and the Abkhazian language, and Abkhazian clergy were excluded from the church. Several of Abkhazia's wooden mosques were destroyed, and pressure put on Abkhazian Muslims to leave the territory.

Although the Bolshevik suppression of the Menshevik regime in 1921 offered, in the early years, some respite to the Abkhaz from overt discrimination, the practice of religion was restricted almost from the beginning. Many churches were stripped of their valuables, and some destroyed. The purges of the 1930s and 1940s under Stalin and Beria hit hard at the Abkhazian clergy and members of the intelligentsia involved in both translation of ecclesiastical literature and documentation of church-history in Abkhazia. Following Stalin's death, restrictions on the research or publishing of the history of religion and belief in Abkhazia continued, the activity of the church was limited, and churches were closed, Abkhazians were not trained for the clergy, and services, when they were held, were conducted in the Georgian language only. What was left of Islam was also quashed; by the end of the Soviet period, there were no mosques in Abkhazia, and no overt practice of Islam, though some mullahs were left in the villages; they would still carry out burial and memorial rites locally when requested. Following their usual pattern of assimilation, the majority of Abkhaz defined themselves as atheist by the later stages of Soviet rule (Garb 1986.24).

The Soviet repression of 'official' religion failed significantly to affect Abkhaz religious practice in the same way that the earlier empires had been unable to subsume the ritual practices of the Abkhaz to their confessed religions. Soviet policies did deeply affect the Abkhaz way of life, yet the practice of religion, already a fairly unobtrusive private affair, continued fundamentally unaltered, despite the recorded prevalence of atheism among the Abkhaz.

The Abkhaz pantheon

The basic rituals of religion in Abkhazia have their roots in pagan polytheistic rituals and beliefs, and are inextricably linked to the structure of the extended family or lineage (all those who share a surname). Each lineage still has its own festivals and rituals, though few now observe the *'ams£ſara*, the specific day or days each week when certain types of work and activity were forbidden for their particular family: when, among other things, they could not marry, perform funerals, or wash.

Traditionally, members of one lineage were buried close to one another, usually in a family burial ground, but increasingly in cemeteries in Soviet times. Though there did exist in earlier centuries the unusual custom of hanging the bodies of the dead in trees, either wrapped in skins or in wooden boxes, this tradition did not last. Funerals now are a complex ritual of mourning and celebration; the traditional displays of

horsemanship are generally no longer held, but every funeral, both Christian and Muslim, involves a large gathering of people and a feast. Unusually, instances have been recorded when a burial has been carried out according to Muslim ceremony, and then according to Christian, the unique logic being that 'If Allah cannot be of help, then perhaps Christ can' (Smyr 1994.15).

Each lineage also has its own sacred place, or *a'nyxa*. Though few families now have a specified god to whom they pray, in the past each lineage had its own protective spirits to whom sacrifices and prayers were made at an annual gathering. Some families still observe the practice of coming together once a year in their *a'nyxa*, though arguably the ritual has become a fairly secular affair, an occasion for meeting as a family and feasting, as opposed to offering sacrifices to the deities. These sacred places are natural locations, high up in the mountains, or in forest-groves, by springs or rivers, cliffs or sacred trees. The Abkhaz generally were not in the custom of erecting idols or temples to their gods, and the *a'nyxa* took the place of a church or mosque, it being considered an inviolable sacred place. A place of prayer, it was also a location where one could seek refuge and the chance to absolve one's guilt.

Over time, the existence of these sacred locations has acquired a part-Christian mythology; said by some to be the places where St. George's bones were buried, churches have been built in the proximity of several of them. It is not unknown for family ceremonies to have been held inside Christian churches, and Easter (*'Ams£ap*) and St. George's day are important dates in the Abkhaz religious calendar. A wooden or iron cross was often placed in the *a'nyxa*, feasts were held, usually following animal-sacrifice, and other offerings made to the deities, in the form of wine or (more recently) prayer-ribbons tied to the trees.

Procopius of Cæsarea wrote, in the VIth century, of the Abazgians (an Abkhaz tribe) that 'in my time they still worshipped groves and trees [reckoning that] trees are gods' (Lakoba (ed.) 1993.66). Travelling in the second half of the XVIIIth century, another observer described a ceremony: 'In the first days of May the Abkhaz gathered in a dense and dark sacred forest, the trees of which were considered inviolable for fear of offending some supreme being. In this grove, beside a large iron cross, there lived hermits who had gathered from the people significant remunerations for prayers for their health and success. Everyone who had come to the grove brought with them wooden crosses which they then placed anywhere they could find grass, and acquaintances meeting in the forest would exchange these crosses as a sign of friendship' (Lakoba (ed.) 1993.131).

Not only was each lineage in the practice of gathering, but the whole village would also gather over the course of the year to pray for a good harvest, among other

things. In Soviet times, the focus of a sacred grove or tree for the village was seen as a potential threat to order, and attempts were made to control even the pagan elements of religious practice. Fazil Iskander, a well-known writer of part Abkhazian descent, writes of the anti-religious campaigns in the thirties in *Sandro of Chegem*, his satirical novel set largely in the Soviet period: 'In the Kenguria district, there had never been a single mosque or church. But since the campaign [against religion] had to be waged, everyone did what they could. The chairman of the Chegem kolkhoz [collective farm], having consulted with his active members, decided to burn down the Prayer Tree as an object of superstitious worship' (p.171 of vol.1 of the 1991 Russian edition).

Iskander's story makes a mockery of official attempts to control religious practice. For in spite of the secularisation of many 'religious' rituals, the Soviet period had a minimal impact on Abkhaz practice. More recently, some of the sacred locations, among which are Lykhny, Elyr, Dydrypsh, Pitsunda, Ach’andara, Psou and T’q^{W}’archal, have risen to prominence as the focus of larger gatherings of Abkhazians drawn from a wider geographical area, including the urban centres. These sites are endowed with particular spiritual significance for the Abkhaz, and are considered to be related to one another in a complex hierarchy of kinship-relationships (Inal-Ipa 1965.344). Traditionally the focus of religious worship, some of the sacred places have, thus, also become the scenes of mass-gatherings of elders and other members of the population to express social and political grievances. The Soviet emphasis on 'tradition' and 'ethnicity' as a rallying point for political aspirations has allowed for the combination of age-old religious practices with the more recent secular expression of national grievance. With the escalation of tension between Abkhazia and Georgia from the late seventies, for example, crowds of political protestors, sometimes over three thousand of them, would gather around the sacred oak tree at the Lykhny site.

Totemic and animistic beliefs and superstitions were at the foundation of the polytheistic religion which preceded Christianity in Abkhazia. In the past, many families worshipped their ancestors, believing that they were linked with an animal, plant, or element of nature, though all that is left of this today is an indication in some Abkhaz surnames that they may derive from the names of animals or plants. The numerous deities traditionally worshipped by the Abkhaz were also almost all associated with the natural world, or certain animals or elements within it.

The 'god of gods' in the Abkhaz pantheon is *An'Ç^{w}a*, the creator, in whom all the other gods are contained. As with many other words connected with the spiritual life in Abkhaz, this term begins with the Abhaz for mother (*an*); it has been argued that the word derives from the plural form 'mothers' (today *'anaÇ^{w}a*), and arose from the

deification of ancestors (Janashia 1937.120). The first toast still to be given at feasts is one to *An'Ç^{w}a*, in the form of '*An'Ç^{w}a*, you give us the warmth of your eyes' (Inal-Ipa 1965.368). Of the other deities, those associated with the hunt are generally male, and those with agriculture, water, and the earth, female. *A'ɟ^{w}ejpʃaa* is the god of the hunt, and the forest, *A'jarg^{j}* the god of fire and war, and *A'fy* the god of thunder and lightning. *Aj'tar* is the god of reproduction and domestic animals, Dzhadzha [*'∂Ôa∂Ôa*] the goddess of agriculture and fertility, *'Dzyzlan* the goddess of water, *Dzi'waw* the rain-goddess, *A'nana-G^{W}nda* the protectress of people, goddess of the hunt and fertility. Other deities represent animals (among them bears, snakes, dogs, and horses), the earth, sun and moon, mountain spirits, fire and the hearth, bronze and iron.

Religion in post-Soviet Abkhazia

During the war between Georgia and Abkhazia in 1992-93, both members of the Georgian leadership, and much of the international press, initially at least, portrayed events as the struggle between Orthodox Christianity in Georgia and the secessionist Muslim Abkhaz. In keeping with this, Shevardnadze underwent a very public 'conversion' to Christianity and was baptised in the Georgian Orthodox church as Giorgi a few months after the war began. This perhaps was intended to play on Western geo-political fears of the spread of Islamic influence in the post-Soviet space, but in actual fact, religion played no part in the war. The Abkhaz were careful to stress this from the start, holding the opinion that '...The Islamic factor, supposedly influencing Abkhazia, is a myth created by the pro-Georgian lobby in the Moscow press' (Smyr 1994a.42, quoting S. Ivanov). This was borne out by the 'rainbow coalition' against the Georgians which emerged during the war, for it included Muslim and Christian Abkhaz, Muslim Abkhaz from Turkey, North Caucasians, Russians, Greeks and Armenians.

However, questions concerning the position of religion in Abkhazia have become more acute, both because of the inter-ethnic conflict with Georgia and the redefinition of post-Soviet Abkhazian identity, and also due to the potential for tension with the Abkhazian diaspora if and when they do return. Generations of Abkhaz, whose ancestors migrated in the 1860s and after, live predominantly in Turkey. They are practising Muslims and outnumber the Abkhazians in Abkhazia about four to one.

According to Grigori Smyr in 1994, there has been an 'increase in the religiousness of the population', following the war between Georgia and Abkhazia in 1992-93 (Smyr 1994.19). This is, to some extent, borne out by an increase in religious language; for example, a recent article chronicling the history of the church in Abkhazia until 1922, has as an afterword a comment on the war: '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. Amen!' (Chachkhalia 1994a.26). Certainly, the publication of such books as Smyr's *Religioznye verovanja abkhazov* (The Religious Beliefs of the Abkhaz)[5], and others on Islam in Abkhazia indicates that religious identity is undergoing a resurgence of interest. A mosque has recently opened in Gudauta, several Abkhaz have entered Orthodox seminaries in Russia for training, and efforts are being made to acquire ecclesiastical literature and copies of the Bible and the Koran in Abkhaz[6]. Gatherings at the sacred places continue, baptisms have increased, and there are also plans to introduce religious education in the schools, an interesting project when the Abkhaz are 'simultaneously pagan, Christian, Muslim and atheist' (Smyr 1994.20).

On the whole, however, religious revival is not being stressed. And if the post-Soviet years are heralding some revival of interest in, and discussion of, religion, then it is a revival of the typically relaxed and heterogeneous, non-dogmatic religious belief and practice which has characterised the Abkhaz in the past. The emphasis placed on tolerance and the absence of religious rivalry or fundamentalism is evident in a brief excursion on the historical symbolism of the state-flag of Abkhazia, following its adoption in July 1992. The sequence of green and white stripes is taken from the flag of the North Caucasian Republic of 1918, but is said to symbolise religious tolerance, Islam peacefully co-existing with Christianity[7]. In 1995, one Minister of the *de facto* Abkhazian Parliament even included among plans for the restoration of Sukhum the building of a cathedral and a mosque on opposite sides of a square in the centre of town as a symbol of continued peaceful coexistence[8]. While perhaps astute political rhetoric, appealing to Western liberal values, this tolerance also reflects the general attitude toward religion in Abkhazia.

This tolerance largely extends to religions and denominations other than Orthodoxy and Islam in Abkhazia. There has long been a presence of Jews, Armenians, and Catholic communities in the traditionally heterogenous mix of people along the Black Sea coast of Abkhazia. Prof.S.Karpov, talking of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries writes; 'The population of Sebastopolis was ...ethnically variegated. Alongside Greeks and Abkhazians there lived many Jews' (Voronov 1992.264). Certainly, there is evidence which indicates the presence of Jewish

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[5]The second edition is forthcoming (Maikop, 1997).
[6]A translation of St. John's Gospel by Zaira Khiba, originally published anonymously in 1981 by the Swedish Institute for Bible Translation, has already been on sale in Abkhazia.
[7]Information bulletin on Abkhazia, produced by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Abkhazia (Gudauta: October 1993).
[8]Yuri (Jurij) Voronov in an interview with the author in September 1995.

communities in Gagra in the XIth century, and in Sebastopol in the XIVth (Voronov 1993.16-17). Catholicism was introduced with the establishment of trading posts along the Black Sea coast, and increasing links with Genoa from the XIVth century onwards. Evidence of a Catholic community can be found in a letter written in 1330 by the Catholic bishop Peter from Sebastopol wherein he complains that the Genoese Catholic community was being oppressed by the local Orthodox inhabitants. By the beginning of the XIVth century, there was a Catholic episcopal see in Sebastopol, and a Catholic cemetery (Voronov 1993.16-17). There is little evidence of the fate of the minority religious groups in Abkhazia following the 1992-3 war with Georgia. Large numbers of the Greek, Armenian and Jewish populations were evacuated, but small communities have remained, together with Catholics, Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists and Krishnaites. The post-war increase in the popularity of smaller denominations and sects has given rise to an element of religious intolerance, and the banning of Jehovah's Witnesses in Abkhazia.

In conclusion, the complex synthesis of paganism, Christianity and Islam which forms the basis of religious practice in Abkhazia is not prominent in the current discourse of Abkhaz identity. Indeed, the notion of 'religion', which has always been approached somewhat idiosyncratically by the Abkhaz, has merged to a great extent with the notion of *'apswara* (viz.what it is to be an Abkhazian). This is a code of ethics, a secular description of the fundamental essence of Abkhaz identity, one not of belief, but of 'mentality'. Incorporating as it does the concepts of 'goodness, fairness, honour and conscience' (Inal-Ipa 1984.44), and allowing for freedom of religious belief, *'apswara* plays a far more significant role than religion as the conscience of the people[9].

[9]The Abkhazian word *'alamys*, a central element of *'apswara*, incorporates both a sense of individual conscience and also a more collective 'conscience of the people'.