

CHRISTIANITY IN GEORGIAN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS: THEN AND NOW

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Georgia and Russia: this is the order in which the issue should be discussed in conformity with the age of their statehoods and Christian Churches; Russia and Georgia: this is the order in which they should be discussed in conformity with the territories and might of these two Christian Orthodox states. They have accumulated over 200 years of experience in joint statehood. They joined their fates at the time when Christian Orthodoxy was their only ideology.

Religion was not the only factor that brought Russia and Georgia together—yet it was the magnet that pulled Georgia. Christianity was more than a faith in Georgia: it was its philosophy, its way of life, and its shield. It was Christianity that defended the state for many centuries against the inroads of numerous enemies who came to impose their religions on us. At all times, Christianity reminded the Georgians that they should preserve their tongue, their national character, and their specific features in order to remain Georgians. We have survived thanks to our Christian faith.

The above sounds bombastic, yet it is absolutely true, even though I deliberately suppressed certain facts... At one time, great Georgian writer Iliia Chavchavadze wrote: “For us Christianity is more than living according to Christ: it means our Motherland, Georgia; it means that we are Georgians. Today, the whole of the Transcaucasus makes no distinction between Georgians and Christianity—they are one and the same thing. Instead of saying that someone became a Christian, they say, he became a Georgian. Our clergy knew only too well that the Fatherland and nationality, united by faith and conjoined with it, are an invincible weapon and shield in the face of the enemy. All sermons were designed to uplift the meaning of Fatherland and nationality to the height of faith so that all people might serve these three intertwined, sacred, and great objects with the utmost dedication.”¹

¹ I. Chavchavadze, *Works*, Tbilisi, 1984, p. 608 (in Georgian).

All of a sudden, however, Christian ideology, this mighty battle-tested weapon which helped the Georgians remain loyal to their faith and not succumb to the Turks and Mongols, lost its power. This happened when the Georgians' interests clashed with the same religion, with another Christian Orthodox people who initially, it seemed, wanted to help them. I have in mind our relations with Christian Orthodox Russia, that is, the "common faith" factor.

Indeed, Georgia and Russia shared the same faith and the same Christian values. At that time, Christians of the same confession sought closer contacts in their opposition to the Muslim countries. Obviously "rapprochement" based on shared faith was tempting and ideologically justified, especially if one of the countries was surrounded by followers of different religions.

The term "common faith" was not limited to Russia alone. It was also applied to Byzantium, with which Georgia maintained active contacts. In 1453, Constantinople fell and Byzantium disappeared, leaving Russia the only country of the same faith and real might to which Georgia might turn for help in times of trial. Religion was not the main factor, yet it certainly played an important role.

Academician N. Berdzenishvili said that the Georgians saw "a new Byzantium in Christian Russia. They expected this force to help them overcome the Muslim aggressors (Iran and Turkey) and restore their country's old glory."² Russia, which claimed the title of the Third Rome, treated Christianity as a handy instrument and ideological screen which did little to conceal its state interests.

Russian-Georgian relations began in the 10th-11th centuries as unconnected episodes in which religion played a fairly important role. Prof. Tsintsadze, who is well known for his studies, had the following to say: "In the 11th century, Georgia inevitably found itself in Christian Russia's zone of attention. At that time, Christians of the same typicon were bound to establish close contacts, to say nothing of other circumstances."³

The marriage between Kievan Prince Iziaslav Mstislavovich and the daughter of a Georgian czar

(either Czar Demetre or David the Builder, the name is not important for the purposes of this article) is one of the facts confirming the ties between Russia (or rather Kievan Rus) and Georgia. Common faith was one of the most important factors behind this marriage.

The religious factor became especially important in the 12th century when Russian prince Iury Bogoliubskiy was chosen as husband for Georgian Queen Tamar. This fact was not very important for the relations between the two countries since the prince had been expelled from his Russian domain. This marriage illustrates the role of religion in matchmaking. Georgian historian Basil Ezosmodzgvani (a court priest) wrote that despite a wide choice of bridegrooms Iury Bogoliubskiy was selected. "When the meeting of the clergy was almost over, all the spasalars and eristavs of the kingdom entered the hall to inform the fathers of the Church that collective efforts were needed to bring a bridegroom to the royal palace for Tamara. They all gathered in front of the queen and all agreed that a man should be sent to the Russian kingdom because the Russian tribes were also Orthodox Christians. This was badly done because they dispatched a man unworthy of this mission and because they knew nothing of the man they invited."⁴

A contemporary historian wrote that faith was the decisive factor; some historians believe, however, that a common faith was not the only and decisive factor: the nobles' struggle against the centralized state and court squabbles were also important. Still, a common faith was one of the most important arguments. Academician N. Berdzenishvili wrote: "The Russian prince's Christian Orthodox faith was a weighty argument in his favor. There were probably other potential bridegrooms; they were also discussed, but they lacked the necessary virtue—the Christian Orthodox faith. The story should be presented in such a way that the supporters of the Russian prince inflated the argument, the practical importance of which in this case was not that great, since the husband of the queen of Georgia should, *io ipso*, be an Orthodox Christian. So the Russian prince would have triumphed over all other candidates *ceteris*

² N. Berdzenishvili, *Voprosy istorii Gruzii*, Vol. IV, Tbilisi, 1950, p. 110.

³ I. Tsintsadze, *Razyskaniia po istorii rossiysko-gruzinskikh vzaimootnosheniy X-XI vv.*, Tbilisi, 1956, p. 59.

⁴ B. Ezosmodzgvani, *Kartlis tskhovreba* (The Life of Kartli), Tbilisi, 1959, p. 16.

paribas. This decision displeased Basil Ezosmodzgvvari, who reproached those who made it of attaching too much importance to Christian Orthodoxy: ‘this was badly done.’⁵

While the Mongol rule continued, contacts were not intensive—at least our information about them is meager. Since both states reported to the Golden Horde, their envoys probably met at the khan’s court. The peoples that shared the same faith obviously wanted to know more about each other, even though after 1223 all mention of Georgia disappeared from the Russian sources. This does not mean that the countries knew nothing about each other. Plano Carpini, an envoy of Pope Innocent IV, described a crowd of czars and princes who gathered in Karakorum at the court of the great khan of the Mongols: “Outside the fence were Russian Prince Iaroslav of Suzdal, numerous Chinese and Solangan princes, as well as two Georgian crown princes, and an ambassador of the Caliph of Balah, himself a former sultan. I also counted over a dozen other Saracen sultans.”⁶

The subjugated peoples exerted every effort to regain their freedom; Plano Carpini wrote that the Georgians were planning an uprising.⁷ These plans were obviously approved of by peoples of the same faith who also lived under the Mongolian yoke. They probably shared their secret plans.

The fall of Constantinople in 1453 sent the Christian world into a moral decline; Georgia suffered more than the others. Indeed, it was a heavy political and cultural blow to Czar Georgi who lost a valuable son-in-law in the person of Cesar Constantine. The country lost the main, and the shortest, route connecting it with the West and found itself within a hostile circle of Muslim nations.

The Christian world responded to the situation around Byzantium with a call for a crusade against Turkey. Pope Pius II went as far as elaborating an extensive plan according to which the Christian world should unite to liberate Constantinople; Georgia had an important role to play. The Pope sent Ludovic of Bologna to Georgia to discuss

⁵ N. Berdzenishvili, I. Tsintsadze, “Izyskania po istorii rossisko-gruzinskikh otnosheniy,” in: *Materialy k istorii Gruzii i Kavkaza*, Collection 29, Tbilisi, 1951, p. 313.

⁶ P. Carpini, “Istoria mongolov, kotorykh my nazyvaem tatarami,” Transl. into Georgian by G. Kiknadze, in: *Materialy k istorii Gruzii i Kavkaza*, Tbilisi, 1942, Part II, p. 56.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

an anti-Turkic coalition. Georgia, which deeply felt the tragedy, willingly joined the anti-Ottoman alliance. At that time, the czar and local princes were engaged in endless and bloody internecine strife. According to M. Tamarashvili’s work *Istoria katolichestva sredi gruzin* (History of Catholicism among the Georgians), the czar and princes made peace in view of a possible war against Turkey and its inevitable consequences. Their treaty said: “We, all Christian princes, have entered into a union and closed our ranks, and we vow to fight the Turks with all our skill and force; especially those who captured Constantinople because they are the worst enemies of the Christians.”⁸

Academician I. Javakhishvili wrote in this connection: “At first it was the Western church leaders who were resolved to fight the Ottoman Turks, and they tried to persuade the Georgians to join them. Very soon the Georgians embraced the idea as their own; they started dreaming avidly about victory. It was their turn to persuade the Western rulers.”⁹

The Georgians failed to create an anti-Turkic alliance; disappointed, they also failed to preserve peace in their own country; the old strife was rekindled. The situation was grave. Georgia, which had fallen apart into several kingdoms and principalities, was growing weaker because of internal strife. Surrounded by Muslim neighbors, it needed allies. Academician Berdzenishvili wrote: “A Christian ally would have become a factor of immense moral importance for Georgia in its hard struggle.”¹⁰

There were no such allies in sight, yet gradually Russia began to develop into a potential ally of the same faith. By that time, the Grand Prince of Muscovy had accumulated more power. In 1472, Ivan III married the niece of the last Byzantine emperor, Sophia Paleologus. The Pope facilitated the marriage in the hope of enlisting Russia as an anti-Muslim ally. Russia itself was seeking to replace Byzantium after the fall of Constantinople. This marriage consolidated its claims and allowed it to proclaim itself the Third Rome and even to borrow the double-headed eagle, the Byzantine symbol, as its coat of arms.

⁸ M. Tamarashvili, *Istoria katolichestva sredi gruzin*, Tbilisi, 1902, p. 596 (see also: I. Javakhishvili, *Istoria gruzinskogo naroda*, Vol. IV, Tbilisi, 1965, p. 67).

⁹ I. Javakhishvili, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

¹⁰ N. Berdzenishvili, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

Ivan IV continued the policy of Ivan III: he wanted the Russian czars to be crowned by the Patriarch of Constantinople. He sent Archbishop of Suzdal to Constantinople to ask the patriarch to recognize him as the czar of Muscovy and heir to the Byzantium throne. The patriarch did even more: he not only confirmed the title, but also issued instructions to mention the name of the Russian czar during all church services in the same way this had been done in honor of the emperor of Byzantium,¹¹ which was very important for the peoples subjugated by the Ottoman Empire. Russian historian N. Keptarev had the following to say on this score: "Since that time, all peoples of the Christian Orthodox East have been looking at the Moscow czars as their representatives and the head of Christian Orthodoxy and as their only and natural hope; it was on them that the peoples conquered by Turkey pinned their hopes of restoring their lost freedom and independence."¹²

Some historians doubted that the Moscow Principedom could fulfill the functions of already fallen Byzantium and the Third Rome. "The Moscow theory (of Moscow as the Third Rome) was cunningly used to extol the czar. The book of royal genealogies acquired an entry about Augustus as an ancestor who proved the kinship between the House of Riurik and the House of Julius. Later, more grounds for close ties between Russia's royal and imperial power were looked for and found."¹³

Indeed, at that time, Russia was too weak to defend Christianity or to pursue an active policy against the Ottoman Empire, even though it wanted to do this. It was fighting for international prestige with varied means. We should bear in mind that two Muslim countries—Iran and the Ottoman Empire—were fighting for domination over the Transcaucasus, including the Georgian kingdoms and principedoms. Russia also wanted its share of influence in the Caucasus. I have already written that as distinct from Iran and the Ottoman Empire, it was

a Christian Orthodox country which shared this faith with Georgia. At that time, Russia was still unable to actively advance its interests in the Transcaucasus: in the 16th-17th centuries it was busy strengthening its northern and western borders. Russian diplomats, however, looked further than this and regarded Russia's relations with Georgia in perspective. They were lavish with promises, and sometimes even gave the Georgian czars and princes small gifts.

Did the Georgian politicians naively believe that Russia would extend disinterested help because of their shared faith? Would they seek this alliance if they knew that their statehood would be ruined?

At certain times the Georgian kingdoms abandoned their orientation toward Russia, thus encouraging the Catholic missionaries patronized in the 17th-18th centuries by some of the Georgian czars. In the 17th century, in particular, Catholicos Domenti agreed to recognize the Pope's superiority. On the whole, the Georgian historians compared religious relations to a barometer clearly indicating which of the religions predominated at any given moment. For example, domination of Christian Orthodoxy spoke of Russia's influence; Catholicism, of Europe's; and Muslim, of Iran's or Turkey's. Religious meanderings followed the changing balance of forces. Finally, the balance tipped in favor of Russia. Academician Javakhishvili was convinced that the Georgian kingdoms and principedoms had lost their statehoods not only because of czarist Russia's perfidy, but also because of the political naiveté of the leaders of Kartli-Kakhetia: they were too trustful because of their shared religion.

On 18 January, 1801 the Kartli-Kakhetian kingdom was made a gubernia of Russia. This sealed the future of the Georgian Church. It should be added here that the Treaty of Georgievsk of 1783 between Russia and Kartli-Kakhetia established that administration of the Georgian Church and its relations with Russia's Holy Synod should be set forth in a special document. The fathers of the Georgian Church insisted that the document should rule out the czar's interference in the affairs of the Church, therefore, if and when the problem was resolved in political terms, issues of faith and relations between the churches should be addressed. Over time, however, the Russian authorities began ignoring the document and gradually placed the Georgian Church under the Holy Synod's authority. In 1811,

¹¹ See: N. Derzhavin, *Plemennye i kul'turnye svyazi bolgarskogo i russkogo naroda*, Moscow, 1944, p. 82 (see also: K.S. Lituashvili, *Natsional'no-osvoboditel'naya bor'ba bolgarskogo naroda protiv Fanariotskogo iga v Rossii*, Tbilisi, 1978, p. 2).

¹² N. Keptarev, *Kharakter otnoshenia k pravoslavnomu Vostoku v XVI-XVII stoletiiakh*, Sergiev Posad, 1914, p. 27 (see also: K.S. Lituashvili, op. cit., p. 12).

¹³ Bishop Kirion, *Kul'turnaia rol Iverii v istorii Rusi*, Tiflis, 1910, p. 65.

Catholicos Anthony II was called to St. Petersburg: this was the first sign that the Georgian Church would lose its independence. The Exarchate was set up with the first exarch Varlam (in the world Eristavi) at its head. This power-greedy man was courting the Synod. His role in setting up the Exarchate earned him the hatred of all generations of the Georgian clergy. Varlam was the only Georgian among the 15 exarches appointed after him (all of them were Russians).

The rules of the Russian Church were gradually imposed on the Georgian Church; many temples started serving in a language unknown to the Georgians; the Georgian Church became part of the Russian Church. The clergy was deprived of a large share of its landed possessions, which became public property. In exchange, the Holy Synod gave money to the Exarchate. The sums were much smaller than the incomes the Georgian Church received from its former possessions: the Georgian clerics considered this act sheer robbery and were openly discontent with their worsened economic situation. In addition, more often than not the appointed exarches were ignorant and narrow-minded chauvinists. The Russian authorities were obviously trying to use the Christian Orthodox Church to colonize and Russify the local people, to the great indignation of the latter. The exarches and their aids tried to exclude the Georgian tongue from school curricula; they did their best to divide the Georgians into separate ethnic groups. With this aim in view, they announced that the Megreles and Svans were not Georgians. In 1886, Exarch Paul publicly damned the Georgian nation, thus raising a wave of protest among the Georgians and earning a diamond cross as a token of imperial gratitude.

It should be said that the use of Russian in the Georgian churches deprived the services of their emotional impact; the faith weakened and a certain coolness could be detected among the laity.

Late in the 19th century the clergy raised its voice to express indignation at the lowered authority of the Church and religion (deprived of its lands, the Church relied on the flock for its continued well-being); indifference to God was explained by the lost independence and required that the Church's autocephaly be restored. It was at this time that certain publications insisted that the Russian authorities had violated the eighth rule of the III Ecumenical Council and the thirty-ninth rule of the VI Ecumenical Council by appointing

the exarches of Georgia without consulting the Eastern Patriarch.

We can agree with the argument that the Russian language and an alien people at the helm did weaken the ties between the clergy and the nation and reduced the impact of religion on the laity, a large part of which moved away from the Church. The Georgian clergy preferred to ignore the other reasons for the people's increasing indifference to religion. They never mentioned the high church taxes, which the nation could not afford (among other things the peasants demanded that the taxes be abolished). This explains why during the revolutionary years of 1905-1907, the Georgians also moved against the Church. Unfortunately, at that time, the Church, which served Russian autocracy and was one of its pillars, fought against dissidents and cooperated with the police (the Russian church also did this). This obviously did not add to its popularity. (This went on until 1917 when the Provisional Government finally gave the Georgian clergy back its autocephaly.)

It stands to reason that, by joining a country with a common faith, the nation should have enjoyed, if not a privileged, then at least an equal position with the peoples of other faiths. But because of this common faith the Georgians were subjected to oppression to a much greater extent than other nations: they lost both their national independence and the centuries-old autocephaly of their Church.

The report submitted by above-mentioned great Georgian writer Ilia Chavchavadze to the Russian authorities in Georgia clearly gave vent to the bitter fruits of putting too much trust in Christian Orthodox closeness and shared faith: "In Russia, all non-Russian peoples are independent when it comes to administering their churches. The Armenians, Muslims, Jews, etc. are free in their religious affairs; they have religious schools of their own, in which children are taught in their native tongues and where much attention is paid to studying everything that is relevant to them. And their own clerics are directing these schools independently. Strange enough, only the Christian Orthodox Georgians are deprived of this attribute as though they are being punished for being Orthodox Christians.

"Lack of rights applied only to the Orthodox Georgians could be interpreted as non-Russian Orthodox Christians not being welcome in Christian Orthodox Russia. This can be explained by a mis-

understanding that has been damaging the cause of Christian Orthodoxy for a long time.

“I am convinced that preservation of this absurd situation can only be described as a state and religious mistake.

“I draw your attention to a request for restoring the centuries-old autocephaly of the Georgian Church. I do hope that by doing this we can perform our civil duty and that Your Majesty will support our request.”¹⁴

Czarist Russia had no intention of restoring autocephaly: it treated Christian Orthodoxy and the Christian Orthodox Church as an instrument of colonial suppression and subjugation, as a means of Russifying the local people in order to gain complete control over its recently acquired possessions. Later, Russian clergymen did not bother to conceal the obvious. Archbishop Sergius authored an amazingly frank work entitled *Gruzinskaia avtokefalia i ee restavratsia* (Georgian Autocephaly and Its Restoration), in which he wrote: “It was decided that a small country with an independent and ancient culture be Russified, while its Christian Orthodox Church, the guardian of Georgian spirituality, was destined to become part of the Russian Orthodox Church. The methods selected for the purpose matched the times: uncivil administration, violence, arbitrariness of the bureaucrats and satraps of czarist Russia, permissiveness and interference in the affairs of the church hierarchs.”¹⁵

Bishop David summed up the misfortunes caused by the loss of autocephaly and introduction of the Exarchate in his study called *Ob avtokefalii*

tserkvi Iverii (On the Autocephaly of the Iberian Church) published in 1912 in Russian. He wrote, in particular:

“1. The exarches do not concern themselves with meeting the Georgians’ spiritual needs; 2. They do not know the Georgian language and so are unable to establish close contacts with the believers; 3. They do not respect the Georgians’ national feelings and their culture; 4. They do nothing to develop lofty feelings among the Georgian clergy; 5. They suppress the Georgian clergy; deny them promotion to high posts, and pay them less than their Russian colleagues; 6. They interfere with the literary-theological efforts of the Georgian clergy and with the plans to set up a Georgian church publication; 7. They promote disunity among the Georgians by trying to set the Megreles against other Georgians; for this purpose they introduced church services in the Megrelian language; 8. They are trying to Russify the Georgian Church; 9. They insist that the Georgian clergy should strictly follow the rules and are obviously permissive when it comes to the Russian priests; 10. They do not pay enough attention to working with the flock; 11. They try to set Georgian priests against each other; 12. They belittle the Georgians’ national specific features or, at least, ignore them; they are doing their best to uproot everything that might breed national feelings in the Georgians; 13. The Russian exarches are obviously unable to love their flock, to share its joys and sorrows, or to be proud of everything that breeds pride in the Georgians and to appreciate everything that is dear to the Georgians; 14. The Exarches do not love the Georgians or Georgia.”¹⁶

¹⁴ I. Chavchavadze, op. cit., p. 678.

¹⁵ K.S. Kekelidze Institute of Manuscripts, Georgian Academy of Sciences, Record Group 47, Inventory 1, File 242, Sheet 5. Archbishop Sergius, *Gruzinskaia avtokefalia i ee restavratsia*, Perm, 1962, p. 5.

¹⁶ Bishop David, *Ob avtokefalii tserkvi Iverii*, Tiflis, 1912, p. 36.

Restoration of Autocephaly

All the injustices came to an end when the dream of all Georgians was finally realized: the Georgian Christian Orthodox Church regained its independence at a Church assembly held in Mtskheta on 12 March, 1917. Two weeks later, on 27 March, the Provisional Government of Russia endorsed the decision; the restored independence was limited to one nation—the Georgians—rather than to a certain territory.

This was the first and most difficult step, followed by others which consolidated the position of the Georgian Church as an autocephalous structure. In September 1917, the congress of the Georgian Orthodox Church elected Kirion Sadzaglishvili, one of the staunchest fighters for autocephaly, as the Catholicos-Patriarch (the enthronement ceremony took place on 1 October). The congress is often called historic, even though the much-suffering Orthodox Church of Georgia had to travel a difficult road to its independence and sacrificed a lot for its sake.

The Russian Orthodox Church, and primarily Patriarch Tikhon, advised the Georgian hierarchs to apologize to the Holy Synod for this mistake in order not to find itself outside the One Holy Apostolic Church. In his reply, Catholicos-Patriarch Leonid of Georgia pointed out that at no time had the Georgian Christian Orthodox Church expressed its desire to join the Russian Church or to be dominated by it. On the contrary, he wrote, it wanted to remain independent. The Holy Synod respected this desire during the first years after Georgia joined Russia and never interfered in its internal affairs. The Catholicos-Patriarch further wrote that the Russian secular authorities deprived the Georgian Church of its autocephaly by an act of violence. After that, wrote Leonid, all attempts by the Georgian hierarchs and the nation to restore independence were cut short by secular power.¹⁷

In 1905, the request to restore autocephaly was also sent to the Synod, which refused to support it.

As soon as Nicholas II was deposed, the Provisional Government started functioning, and the autocephaly of the Georgian Church was restored without asking for the central government's permission. The Georgian hierarchs sent a delegation to Moscow to inform the Synod about this historic decision. Archbishop Sergius of Finland spoke in the name of the Synod. He stated: "The Russian church consciousness never rejected the idea of restoring the old order of the Georgian Church. This could not be done, yet the church figures should not be blamed. This dream can be fulfilled under the new conditions. There are minor problems, but they can be overcome and corrected at the Local Council of the Russian Orthodox Church, at which the two churches should meet."¹⁸ Regrettably, the Georgian Church was not invited. In his message Catholicos-Patriarch Leonid referred to the benevolent words pronounced by Archbishop Sergius, who said: "Let our two peoples, who share one religion and are true to the behests of both churches, live in peace and fulfill their predestination for the sake of our salvation and to the glory of God."¹⁹

By that time, having recognized the restored autocephaly of the Georgian Orthodox Church, the Union of the Russian Clergy and Laity formed in Tbilisi demanded that a Russian exarchate be set up in the Transcaucasus to allow the parishes wishing to remain under the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church join it. A corresponding text was published on 14 June, 1917 together with the temporary rules of administering these parishes; a certain Theophylactus was appointed bishop in Tbilisi. The Georgian hierarchs resolutely protested against the withdrawal of the non-Georgian parishes from the jurisdiction of the Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia; Theophylactus was deported, while newly appointed Metropolitan Cyril was not allowed into the country.

This ruptured the devotional contacts between the Russian and Georgian churches; the alienation continued for 25 years and ended in 1943 when, during World War II, Patriarch Sergius was enthroned. Holy and Most Blessed Kalistrate, the Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia, congratulated him on his enthronization and expressed the hope that in the future the two churches—the Russian and Georgian—would live in peace and mutual understanding. By way of response, Patriarch Sergius promptly sent Archbishop Anthony of Stavropol and Piatigorsk to Georgia as his representative. The long expected reconciliation became a fact: on 31 October Catholicos-Patriarch Kalistrate together with Georgian hierarchs and other members of the clergy among whom was Archbishop Anthony served a festal liturgy in the oldest cathedral of Tbilisi.

The Holy Synod headed by Patriarch Sergius heard Archbishop Anthony's report and ruled to regard the devotional and eucharistic contacts between the two fraternal churches restored. As distinct from

¹⁷ See: *Poslanie Sviatetshego Leonida, Katolikos-Patriarkha vseia Gruzii k Sviatetshemu Tikhonu, Patriarkhu Moskovskomu i vseia Rossii*, Tiflis, 1920, p. 40.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

the previous period, the Georgian Church was asked to look after the Russian parishes, while all autocephalous churches were informed of the Georgian Church's restored autocephaly.

Here it is appropriate to recall relatively recent history. On 26 May, 1918 Georgia announced that it had restored its independence lost in 1801. Between that day and 25 February, 1921 (when the Red Army, ignited with communist ideas, invaded the country), Georgia and its Christian Orthodox Church enjoyed a short reprieve.

The government headed by Mensheviks remained true to its ideas about religion and the church, on the one hand, but was well aware of their role in Georgian history and spiritual life, on the other; the Mensheviks knew that the Church could help the recently revived country to stand more firmly on its feet. The government, in turn, did its best to help the Church restore its former prestige and strength. The Georgian Orthodox clergy greeted the Mensheviks with enthusiasm: the Church was convinced that the recently acquired independence answered the nation's centuries-old dreams, which had finally come true through the enormous efforts of many generations. At the same time, the clerics were afraid of a new wave of Russian expansion, the export of revolution, and the Bolsheviks, whose ideology left no space for the church and religion, believing them to be remnants of the past that should be uprooted. No wonder, Catholicos-Patriarch Kirion wrote at the time: "Today, the perfidious nature of Russia's policies in the past and present is no secret. In the past, it was autocracy that destroyed us; today, it is the 'Socialist-Bolsheviks,' who wish to put out our eyes by threatening to close Batumi, our only window to Europe." This was written in anticipation of a catastrophe; the Catholicos-Patriarch repeated in despair: "The Georgian sky has darkened."²⁰ The Georgian clergy called on the nation to strengthen the popular militia to save the Motherland.

The inevitable was not avoided: the 11th Red Army burst into Georgia and deprived it of its independence. Later the events unfolded according to the scenario common to the Soviet Union. Decree No. 21 On Separation of the Church from the State and School from the Church of 15 April, 1921, modeled after a similar Russian decree of 20 January, 1918, was one of the most eloquent documents of the time.

Relations between the Russian and Georgian Orthodox Churches in Our Time

The seventy years of Soviet power deprived the Church of all its rights and brought it to the brink of destruction. Its formal independence did not save it either from communist ideological oppression, or from the Russian Orthodox Church, without whose permission it could not act independently in any sphere, least of all in international relations.

Before the revolution, the Georgian Church had nearly 3,000 churches and monasteries and 5,000 clerics; in the 1960s-1970s, it was left with 45 churches and about 100 elderly priests working in them. The Soviet Union's disintegration and rejection of the Soviet atheist ideology showed the way out of the atheist impasse. Under the guidance of Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II, faith was restored and the nation turned back to the Church. The number of priests increased, old churches and monasteries were restored, and new temples and monasteries built; more religious schools and religious publications appeared.

The current relations between the Georgian and Russian Churches can be described as inconsistent and contradictory. Russia is a huge Christian Orthodox country by which the world shapes its ideas about Christian Orthodoxy. When both countries belonged to one state, the Russian Church inevitably affected the ideology, mentality, and way of life of the Georgian clergy. Many of them were educated in Russian religious schools, where they used Russian textbooks written by Russian theologians and Russian trans-

²⁰ Central Historical Archives of Georgia, Record group 1459, Inventory 1, File 188, pp. 16-17 Central Historical Archives of the Georgian S.S.R.

lations of foreign works. Since the Russian Orthodox Church had to obey the official authorities, which never hesitated to use it in their own interests, it went without saying that Russia's security services also had certain influence among the clergy. This influence can still be felt today: there is a group of clerics in the Georgian Church who oppose those who look toward the West. The picture becomes even clearer if we take into account the fact that some Orthodox Christians belong to the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (Boston).

Today, there is a lot of talk in Russia about Freemasonry as a great threat to the world, Russia, and its Christian Orthodox faith. This information has reached Georgia: it is predicted that it, as another Christian Orthodox country, will perish at the hands of Masons. We all know, however, that Russia presents the only threat to Georgia and its territorial integrity. Regrettably, the Russian Federation does not want stability in Georgia and is exploiting the conflicts and difficulties it created itself when Georgian statehood was taking shape and Georgia was busy restoring its territorial integrity. Worst of all, Moscow is actively exploiting the Russian Orthodox Church to preserve its influence in the Caucasus and thus pursue its great-power designs. The Russian clerics are actively interfering in the affairs of the regions of another country, particularly in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in an effort to spread their influence and jurisdiction to these parts of Georgia. The church is as aggressive as the state and is trying to camouflage its true intention with religious motives. The Georgian Church is openly protesting against this far from Christian conduct.

Here is a specific example. In July-August 2004, during the events in the Tskhinvali Region, Chairman of the West European Diocese of the Georgian Church Reverend Abraham declared: "Immediately after the beginning of the conflict in the Tskhinvali Region, the ROC took certain steps to widen the gap between the Georgians and the Ossets. Russian clerics were used for this purpose too. To camouflage these aims, the ROC refused to accept the Tskhinvali Region under its jurisdiction, yet the separatists received support when they wanted to establish contacts with the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, which did not hesitate to accept them under its jurisdiction. Today, when unification of the two churches looks inevitable, the Tskhinvali Region might find itself under the jurisdiction of Alexy II. If this happens the Georgian Patriarchate may sever eucharistic contacts with the ROC. In the context of the current relations between the two countries, this would be an appropriate measure. The Georgian Orthodox Church, a highly responsible structure, should interfere in the conflict. We do hope that this time at least the Russian side will recall that Georgia is protected by the Mother of God and that it should be treated accordingly."²¹

We all regret that Russia has not abandoned the "big brother" syndrome, its double standards, prejudice, colonial policies, etc. The myth of two Russias does not hold water: its politicians of all hues prefer to use force against Georgia. This explains why there is no progress in our bilateral relations. Because of these aggressive designs, Georgia has to move away from a country with which we share a common religion, culture, and a prolonged period of coexistence in one state. To save itself, Georgia is seeking new roads and new methods. It is impossible to force the Georgian nation to abandon its resolution to liberate itself from Russia's imperial intentions, restore its territorial integrity, and gain real independence.

This raises several questions: will Russia acquire the political strength to soberly assess the current processes and channel them accordingly? Will Russia realize that the double standards according to which Abkhazian and Osset separatism is good while Chechen separatism is bad are leading nowhere? The current policies are obviously overshadowing the religious dimension, Christian Orthodoxy, in our relations with Russia. Russia is exploiting religion to put pressure on Georgia. Was Nikolai Berdiaev right when he wrote: "Russia is living to the detriment of itself and to spite other nations?"²²

Still, Georgia hopes to improve its relations with Russia in the secular and spiritual spheres.

²¹ *Gza*, No. 35 (220), 26 August-1 September, 2004, p. 5.

²² N. Berdiaev, *Sud'ba Rossii. Opyt po psikhologii voyny i natsional'nosti*, Moscow, 1992, p. 49.