

RELIGION AND CONFLICT POTENTIAL IN GEORGIA

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Religion rarely breeds global conflicts, yet on many occasions it deepens them.¹ Potentially, it can also smooth over conflict situa-

¹ See: H. Müller, "Kampf der Kulturen—Religion als Strukturfaktor einer weltpolitischen Konfliktformation?" in: *Politik und Religion* ("Politische Vierteljahresschrift, Sonderheft," 33/2002), M. Minkenberg, U. Willems (Hg.). Wiesbaden, 2003, S. 575.

tions. This is the way to approach Georgia's conflict potential generated by the religious factor: we must identify the role of religion in the present confrontations (including the ethnic ones). We must analyze the role the outside world plays in this context and the degree to which the religious factor affects Georgia's relations with the rest of the world.

A Glimpse into the Past

Throughout history, religion in Georgia has almost always been closely connected with the state. The heyday of Georgian church architecture, monasteries, and theological thought fell during the 9th-10th centuries. It directly predated the heyday of the Georgian state under David IV and Queen Tamar in the 12th-13th centuries. Georgia did not know religious strife: the witch-hunting, extermination of those who belonged to other confessions, persecution of the Jews, and so on, typical of medieval Western

Europe and Russia were unknown in Georgia. In the 7th century when Christian Orthodoxy finally triumphed, there were no heresies or dissent in the Georgian Christian Orthodox Church (GOC): all conflicts were timely defused. All political figures, David the Builder among them, paid a lot of attention to developments in the religious sphere and church life, and sought support from the most respected religious leaders.

The decline of Georgian statehood, which occurred in the 14th-15th centuries, led to the breakdown of the united state into smaller kingdoms and princedoms in the 16th century. Christian Orthodoxy also began to lose its foothold. This was mainly caused by external factors: the country found itself to be an island in a hostile Islamic ocean; the Georgians suffered Tamerlane's devastating raids, who insisted on, but failed to achieve, Islamization of the local nobles. Later, at the end of the 15th century, the Ottoman Empire and Iran moved right up to Georgia's borders. To fortify their domination, they tried to plant Islam in the Caucasus and failed because of the Georgian Christians. In the north, the country bordered on the Islamic Northern Caucasus, which Istanbul and Isfahan constantly stirred up against Georgia. Religion—Christianity vs. Islam—determined the continued existence of the Georgian state and the Georgians as a nation. In the latter half of the 18th century, contrary to the political realities of the time, Russia was chosen as an ally because of its shared religion, Christianity. An analytical document compiled by the Collegium for Foreign Affairs of the Russian Empire in November 1768 entitled "Discussion of Methods Designed to Draw the Georgian Kingdoms into a War Against Turkey" said in part: "The Georgians are a restless nation accustomed to military exercises and feats; the faith they follow here, which is the same as in Russia, arouses devotion to the Russian imperial house and benevolence toward the Russians. There are hopes of being more successful than before if we pool forces with the local empire against the Ottoman Porte... Georgian Czar Irakly, rather than Czar of Imeretia Solomon, may be the cause of something going wrong. The former has to defend his possessions only against the Lezghians—Imeretia separates his possessions from the Turks. At the times when the latter is not attacked, it... protects the Georgian Czar from the difficulties caused by his Turkish neighbor... The Georgians are very religious people, therefore Irakly's unwillingness can be overcome by addressing his conscience."²

This is one of many examples testifying that religion played an important role in the Georgian kingdoms when it came to selecting a foreign policy course. Early in the 19th century, the shared religion made it fairly easy for the Russian Empire to absorb the Georgian kingdoms and princedoms.³ However, this did not prevent the Russian Empire from doing away with the GOC autocephaly and the Patriarchate and banning the use of the Georgian language in church services. It was at the same time that ancient Georgian frescoes in churches were concealed under tapestry. In the 19th and early 20th century, this drove away many Georgians from the church and, therefore, from the faith. Under Soviet power, the GOC like all other churches and confessions in the atheist empire found itself in a quandary. This pushed aside the factor of common faith in the relations between Georgia and Russia. The current relations between the two states have amply testified that the religious factor which tied the two nations together has politically been reduced to naught.

Today, the attitude of Georgian society to religion in the political context and the influence of religion on current Georgian policies are largely determined by the historical aspects discussed above. For the nation's majority its devotion to Christian Orthodoxy has been and remains a demonstration of patriotism and the self-identification of the individual in the nation. (Here I do not refer to an individual's personal religious convictions, his attitude to the church, etc.—I have in mind collective self-identification.) The militant atheism of the Soviet period damaged the position of Christianity in

² V. Macharadze, *Materialy po istorii russko-gruzinskikh otnosheniy vtoroy poloviny XVIII veka*, Part III, Issue I, Tbilisi, 1988, p. 287.

³ For more detail, see: G. Rtskhaladze, "Georgian Foreign Policy of the Second Half of the 18th Century and the Religious Factor," *Religion* (Tbilisi), No. 3-4, 1999, pp. 47-55 (in Georgian).

Georgia, yet what Ilya Chavchavadze said in the late 19th century is still full of meaning. This is more so because most people look at him as an absolute authority; in 1987 the GOC canonized him as St. Ilya the Righteous. Said he: “Besides the teaching of Christ, for us Christianity means the land of Georgia. Today, across the Trans-Caucasus the Georgian and the Christian are synonyms. Instead of saying ‘he adopted Christianity’ they will say ‘he became a Georgian.’”⁴

In other words, Orthodox Christianity has an important role to play in the Georgians’ self-identification as a nation; and it is primarily important for domestic policies. According to recent public opinion polls conducted by the Tbilisi IRI office, a third of ethnic Georgians do not consider the Muslims and Judaists (religions which have been practiced in Georgia for many centuries) to be Georgians (compatriots), while 92 percent favor expulsion of Jehovah’s Witnesses from the country.⁵ This is fraught with conflicts.

Religion remains in the foreground when it comes to an assessment of certain foreign policy issues: people look at Turkey as the second, after Russia, most dangerous country for Georgia.⁶ Today, Tbilisi and Ankara are actively developing partnership and good-neighborly relations; the state border between the two countries has been demarcated and delimited, trade, communications, etc. are rapidly developing. This shows that this treatment of Turkey (Armenia, Russia’s strategic partner, is perceived as the third “most dangerous country,” and not Muslim Azerbaijan, which leans toward Turkey) is rooted in the past and in the political and religious confrontation of the old days described above.

People’s Religious Affiliation and the Main Trends of Interaction among the Main Religions in Georgia’s Regions

According to the latest population census of 2002, there are 4,371,535 people living in Georgia; 3,872,099 of them, or 88.6 percent of the total population, are Christians; and 3,666,233, or 83.9 percent of the total population, are Orthodox Christians. There are 34,727, or 0.8 percent, Catholics in the country; 171,139, or 3.9 percent, Armenian Gregorians; 3,541, or 0.1 percent, Judaists; 433,784, or 9.9 percent, Muslims; 33,468, or 0.8 percent, belong to other confessions; and 28,631, or 0.6 percent, do not affiliate themselves with any confession. At the same time, 94.7 percent of ethnic Georgians are Orthodox Christians; 3.8 percent are Muslims; and 0.3 percent are Catholics.⁷

Those ethnic Georgians who do not belong to Christian Orthodoxy live mainly in Ajaria (there are about 115,160 Sunni Muslims; over 240,550 Orthodox Christians; 683 Catholics; over 3,160 Armenian Gregorians; 161 Judaists; 966 follow other religions; and over 15,330 describe themselves as atheists) and in the neighboring Akhalsikhe District (there are about 27,870 Catholics).⁸

⁴ I. Chavchavadze, *Thoughts* (compiled by G. Kalandarishvili), Tbilisi, 1989, p. 13 (in Georgian). To exclude possible misunderstandings I should say that Chavchavadze added: the Georgian clerics at all times were doing their best to “uplift, raise, and ennoble the Fatherland and nationality to the level of faith,” which means that faith came above all else and that even the Motherland had no meaning without faith. Today post-Soviet Georgian nationalists often ignore this.

⁵ The author thanks Mr. Dmitry Shashkin, head of the IRI program in Tbilisi, for this information.

⁶ According to information supplied by Mr. Shashkin.

⁷ See: *Demografia*, ed. by Anzor Totadze, Tbilisi, No. 2 (7), 2004, p. 51.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

Ethnic minorities in Georgia are mainly not Orthodox Christians and not Christians. The Azerbaijanians in Kvemo Kartli are Muslims, the majority of them are Shi'a Muslims (there are 225,657 of them); the share of the Orthodox Georgian population increased at the expense of Svan migrants (there are over 242,080 of Orthodox Christians); 25,688 Armenian Gregorians live mainly in the Tsalka District; and there are also over 85,000 Armenian Gregorians in Javakhetia. The few Kistin Chechens of the Pankissi Gorge are Sunni Muslims. Abkhazia, with the exception of the Kodori Gorge, was not covered by the population census. There is no information about the religious affiliation of the Ossets of the Tskhinvali Region. Historically, the Ossets of Georgia are either Christians or atheists. The Abkhazes are mainly Muslims, even though for propaganda purposes the authorities prefer to concentrate on the Christian past of these lands.

I shall not go into detail about the confessional affiliation of the Abkhazes and Ossets, since today the religious factor is not prominent in the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Osset conflicts. The conflict potential of religion is limited to a possible confrontation between the churches of Russia and Georgia: the authorities of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia refuse to accept not only Georgian laymen refugees in their territories, but also those Georgian clerics who used to serve in the local Georgian Orthodox churches. The resultant vacuum is filled with Russian clerics (more often than not without the consent of the GOC patriarchy on the canonical territory of which the Georgian Orthodox churches in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region are located). The newcomers refuse to accept the Georgian Patriarch as their head—something which the GOC cannot accept either. Recently a certain Father Georgi made numerous provocative statements: he accused the Georgian clergy of supporting the “genocide of the Osset nation.” (This man is believed to be the chief cleric of the Tskhinvali officials.) The Patriarchy of the Russian Christian Orthodox Church (ROC) dissociates itself from the inadequate behavior of its lower-ranking clerics in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali: it insists that they have neither its approval, nor were they ordained by it. The Georgian and Russian churches are working on settling the problems through a dialog. This became possible when the ROC reconfirmed the autocephaly of the GOC in 1990 (initially confirmed in 1943). Patriarchs Aleksiy II and Ilya II have warm personal relations. At the same time, we should not ignore the fact that continued good relations between the churches depend, in the first place, on the ROC, which has to find the limit beyond which assistance to the believers in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali develops into an attempt to squeeze the GOC out of its canonical territory.

Kvemo Kartli knew no serious religious problems except for small incidences; the same can be said of Javakhetia where on several occasions local Armenians destroyed old Georgian inscriptions on churches to replace them with Armenian ones. This was probably unrelated to religion and for ethnic reasons. The Pankissi Gorge, where Wahhabism flourishes, can be described as a problem territory. Unlike in Kvemo Kartli, in the Pankissi Gorge the Georgian authorities were unable to prevent Wahhabism from being imported from Chechnia, and nor were any real efforts applied. The local Kistin Chechens are less loyal to the Georgian state (this was true even before they embraced Islam of the Wahhabi type) than the other ethnic-religious minorities (with the exception of the Abkhazes and Ossets). In 1992, during the war in Abkhazia, Kistin Chechens boarded a train to go fighting together with Abkhazes against Georgia. Georgians stopped the train in Eastern Georgia and forced the passengers to go home. (Georgian TV covered this in detail.) Today, when the bloodshed in Chechnia is still going on and Chechens are occupied with fighting the Russian army, and when the relations between Moscow and Tbilisi are strained, a religious conflict around the Pankissi Gorge is hardly possible. The local Wahhabis have no other choice: they have to demonstrate their loyalty to the Georgian state. To do this they recently invited the Georgian president's wife to a local mosque. Despite this, the gorge remains a potentially conflict area because the normally not peaceful Chechen variant of Islam has grown even more radical there.

The situation in Ajaria deserves special attention. The figures quoted above show that the Muslims are not in the majority in this autonomous republic populated mainly by Ajarian and Gurian

Georgians. Because of the Ottoman expansion, the former became Muslims while the latter remained Christians. Islam failed to destroy the Georgian ethnic self-awareness among the Ajarian Georgians, even though in the late Middle Ages the Ottoman Empire kindled several fratricide clashes between the Georgian Muslims and Christians. In 1918, the first Georgian republic appeared after the Russian Empire had fallen apart; the Ajarians remained with Georgia despite their faith. During the perestroika years when the state weakened its grip on religion, the GOC turned its attention to Ajaria. Baptisms, etc. became much more frequent there. The communist collapse in Georgia triggered a Christian renaissance and church-building boom in the country, including Ajaria. The process, which started in the late 1980s, is going on fairly smoothly without extremes. In 1991, Batumi, the capital of Ajaria, was a scene of mass unrest: instigated by members of mountainous mosques people took to the streets in protest against the alleged plans to destroy the republic's autonomous status. These were not anti-Christian rallies—they were meant to defend the republic's autonomy, where Aslan Abashidze had been ruling with a firm hand since 1991. Even though he was balancing between Islam and Christianity and funded construction of churches and mosques, Orthodox Christianity gained in strength in the republic during his rule: the number of Christians increased; and the number of churches rose at a faster pace than the number of mosques.⁹ (Churches also appeared in the republic's mountainous areas, the stronghold of Islam.) As an Ajarian and relying largely on his Ajarian entourage, Abashidze described himself as a Christian in front of TV cameras and was seen praying in an Orthodox church. The political importance of this cannot be overestimated. At one time his wife (now deceased) was actively involved in charities and collected donations for churches and monasteries. It was in her time that the GOC received a renovated and excellently equipped orphanage and other facilities.

In the post-Abashidze era, Orthodox Christianity continues to gain in strength: in June 2004, about 200 people from the Khelvachauri District were baptized in the Machakhela River and were presented with baptismal crosses (this was the third mass baptism in this eparchy within a very short time). To mark the place of a future church in the village of Zemo Chkhutuneti, a cross was set up with the blessing of Archbishop of Batumi and Skhalt Dimitry. The Trinity Cathedral is being built in Batumi. The new authorities show their respect for Islam: members of the Ajarian government arrived at the Batumi mosque to congratulate the faithful with Kurban-Bayram. Tbilisi will probably continue using Islam of Ajaria to demonstrate to the Islamic world its religious tolerance and respect for Islam. (In 1992, during an official visit to Georgia of then President of Iran Rafsanjani, he was taken to Ajarian mountainous mosques even though, as distinct from Iranians, the local Muslims were not Shi'ites.)

The Main Stumbling Blocks in Church-State Relations and Public Sentiments in Georgia

Orthodox Christianity, the traditional religion of the absolute majority of Georgians, was not the only faith which became more active in the post-Soviet period. The country attracted numerous sects, mostly from America; there are also Oriental (Hindu) sects operating in the country. (I had personal experience of this when exotic Far Eastern members of the Moon church knocked at my door

⁹ Three churches and one monastery functioned in Ajaria before 1991. Between 1991 and 2001, at least 24 churches were either built or renovated (the author would like to thank Archbishop of Batumi and Skhalt Dimitry and the head of the Archbishop Secretariat for this information).

uninvited.) The Jehovah's Witnesses are the most active and most notorious among the foreign sects; they are lavishly funded from Pennsylvania in the United States and from Germany. They, and similar structures, cannot compete with Christianity and create a more or less massive following, yet their noisy campaigns attract public attention. For example, their members who needed a blood transfusion for medical reasons flatly refused to have it for religious considerations. This caused the death of a small girl whose mother preferred loyalty to the sect and its bans. Several times the sect members found themselves in comical situations; they even tried to walk on the water of Lake Bazalet to emulate Jesus Christ who walked on the water of the Sea of Galilee. No wonder these "benefactors" from across the ocean aroused the indignation of the GOC and public at large. This and similar sects, however, found patrons in Georgia as well: they are NGOs functioning on Western money and influential politicians who blocked everything the GOC suggested in order to legally limit the activities of the so-called totalitarian sects in Georgia.

It should be added that in the years of restored independence, the state did nothing to control the sects—they enjoyed complete freedom. For example, as distinct from the Catholic Church, the Jehovah's Witnesses are a legal entity, and they are active in business and publishing: their eye-catching propagandist literature printed abroad is brought into the country exempt from customs duty. Many influential Western politicians did not shun direct lobbying of their sectarian friends' business and religious interests. Former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker (who in 2003 was actively involved in the election campaign in Georgia) wrote the following in a letter to then President Shevardnadze dated 28 October, 1998: "I am writing this note to introduce my friend, Dan C. Jorgensen, and his son, J. Henry Jorgensen. They are business and ranching people from Utah. As you may know, Utah was founded in mid-1800 by Mormon pioneers.

"Dan's youngest son, J. Henry, is currently serving on a voluntary basis as the assistant to the President of the Church's Mission in Rostov, which includes Georgia, Armenia, and the Black Sea area of Russia. If possible and convenient to your schedule, they would like to introduce you very briefly to Robert Schwartz, President of the Rostov Mission, and then meet with the appropriate authority in the government responsible for religious affairs to explain their work and explore the steps necessary to become recognized in Georgia.

"If you cannot see them, I would certainly understand. However, I would be grateful if you could assist them in setting up a meeting with the appropriate officials. They could be in Tbilisi for one or two days between November 12 to 17 for meetings. Please have your staff communicate your decision directly to them at..."¹⁰

It is commonly believed that Petr Mamradze, former head of the State Chancellery (now the Cabinet Chancellery) and a close associate of late Zurab Zhvania, was one of the most zealous lobbyists of Western sects. Mr. Mamradze never bothered to conceal his bias toward the Baptists; he is known to criticize, albeit indirectly, Orthodox Christianity and the GOC and calls himself "an agnostic." In any case, his pronouncements on religious issues raise certain questions: a head of the State Chancellery is not supposed to offer comments on religious matters.

The Georgian authorities have failed to adjust religious relations to the new realities and finally abandoned the idea of a new law. Instead, they entered into a constitutional agreement with the GOC based on Art 9 of the Basic Law, in which the state recognized the GOC's services to Georgia and its special place in Georgian history. The agreement (concordat) took an unreasonably long time to be completed (for the document's details see below) and left other religions and confessions beyond its scope. The resultant legal vacuum and freedom of sects abetted by the state's passivity and even by the state's latent encouragement aroused illegal and frequently ugly responses. Excommunicated priest Basil Mkalavishvili and his followers made it their business to beat up members of the Jehovah's

¹⁰ Unpublished document from the author's personal archive.

Witnesses, attack their congresses, intercept and burn their books, etc. This was done with the public's latent yet obvious approval. For this reason the state did not dare to move against him and his crowd. When his actions became known internationally, the government instituted a case against him before the court. He stopped appearing in public, while the law enforcement bodies, in turn, stopped looking for the wanted priest.

These processes drew a response not only from Mkalavishvili's small flock. In the summer of 2002, the office of the so-called Liberty Institute, one of the main defenders of the "oppressed" religious minorities, was raided, and its officials were mercilessly beaten. The media wrote that a certain Orthodox Christian fundamentalist organization Djvari (The Cross) was responsible for this. There are many other signs that the relations between the sects and the radical Orthodox Christians have become explosive.

These developments have inevitably affected the GOC: on the one hand, the ultra-liberals (Basil Kobakhidze and several other priests) became more active. They have outside support from the NGOs of the Liberty Institute ilk that sided with the opposition to Shevardnadze (with the same people who later came to power). Their cooperation is still alive. The ultra-liberals did not limit themselves to just criticism of Mkalavishvili's obscurantist group—they launched an ideological attack on the GOC and specifically on the Patriarchy. They described Mkalavishvili as the product of the policies pursued by the Patriarchy, which had allegedly moved to an ultra-conservative, Russophilic, etc. position; and that allegedly Patriarch Ilya II had been pushed aside and could no longer control the situation. They were especially critical of a decision to withdraw from the World Council of Churches (of which Ilya II was the president for some time) and from the Conference of European Churches passed in 1997. For some reason they were convinced that the decision was instigated by Moscow, or to be more exact, by the ROC.¹¹ In addition, the "liberals" demonstratively take part in ecumenical services without the permission of their superiors. Thus they are violating one of the underlying principles of the Church—obedience.

At the same time, "ultra-conservatives" also became quite active in the church and quasi-church circles. They are obscurantists who are placing their stakes on xenophobia and total confrontation with the entire world. There are forces oriented toward similar groups in the ROC (they refuse to recognize the Cross of St. Nino, a symbol of Christianity in Georgia, kept in the Cathedral of Sioni). Their influence is fairly limited. There are several larger groups which think along "national Orthodoxy" lines and are paranoid about everything foreign. (They never tire of looking for masons, producing forgeries like a Dulles speech that has never been made, etc.) These groups might have gained some weight. It was obvious that in recent years Patriarch Ilya II and other high church figures were under pressure from the ultra-liberal and ultra-conservative fronts. Judging by the rumors about Ilya II's possible replacement with the Bishop of Dmanissi Zenon, which appeared in the press late in 2004, the liberals scored a temporary victory. Bishop Zenon, however, resolutely denied this possibility and condemned all attempts at putting pressure on Ilya II; the public negatively responded to the very possibility of replacing the patriarch; students went into the streets to support him. (According to the public opinion poll carried in 2003, the GOC enjoyed the support of over 80 percent of the country's population.) These acts have somewhat defused the tension.

Back in 2003 Patriarch Ilya II and the GOC Holy Synod warned the nation: "Recently our society has been demonstrating lamentably unhealthy trends. Some people seem to be unaware that religious extremism and radical liberalism deepen the existing split... We would like to point out that the Orthodox Christians of our country are not irritated by all sorts of religious groups and sects per se—it is their unscrupulous proselytism that causes displeasure. It seems that the state should take timely

¹¹ Cf. an article by a "liberal" priest Father Mikael Asatiani of 10 July, 2004 [<http://kavkaz-uzel.ru/printdigest/digest/id/683372.html>].

measures to adopt a Law on Religion to bring order to the current situation and uproot the wrong trends.”¹² Even before that, on 12 July, 2003 the Patriarchy issued a statement in which it condemned both liberals and conservatives who put pressure on the Church. At a press conference, Archpriest David Sharashenidze, who heads the Patriarchy press center, said that the extremists who were accusing the Georgian Orthodox Church of contacts with other confessions and the liberals who spoke about its contacts with the Russian special services “were manipulated by all sorts of forces trying to establish their control over the Georgian Orthodox Church.” He pointed to Archpriest Basil Kobakhidze as the pillar of the “liberals,” who was convinced that the GOC was influenced by dark forces which gained control in 1997 when the GOC left the World Council of Churches and the Conference of European Churches. He rejected these accusations as false and confirmed that the Patriarchy maintained friendly contacts with all Christian Orthodox churches. He went on to say that the World Council of Churches and the Conference of European Churches “failed to justify the hopes and did not till the ground for a genuinely Christian unification.”¹³ The Synod, which met for its session late in 2004, had to suspend the performance of religious rites by priest Basil Kobakhidze for flagrant violations of the Church canons; other “liberal” priests were warned.¹⁴ These resolute steps poured cold water on the zealous radicals, yet they failed to resolve the contradictions inside the Church.

This relatively protracted conflict inside the Church belongs to the relations between the GOC and the state: I have already written that all kinds of groups actively involved in Church and religious developments were closely connected both with certain sections of society and NGOs and with all sorts of political forces. There are two fields of problems in state/Church relations: the attitude to the sects and non-interference in the Church’s domestic affairs. While the GOC, society, and the state remain riveted on these problems, other urgent issues actively discussed in the West on the initiative of the Catholic and other confessions (abortion laws, social programs, etc.) are left outside the scope of public attention in Georgia. Meanwhile, in our country education is an obvious priority in the GOC’s relations with the state.

The concordat between power (represented by the president) and the Church (represented by the Catholicos-Patriarch) signed on 14 October, 2002¹⁵ envisages the sides’ cooperation in this sphere. Art 5 of the document contains three paragraphs: teaching the Orthodox faith as an optional subject in schools, the Church being responsible for its content and the teachers; under Georgian law and on an equal basis, the state and the Church agreed to recognize and accept the certificates, academic titles, and ranks issued by educational establishments; the state and the Church acquired the right to carry out joint educational programs in this sphere, and the state undertakes the task of ensuring the functioning of religious educational establishments.

Very soon after the ceremony to sign the concordat (this is still the only legal act related to the Church or religion in Georgia), new people came to power in the republic. At first, the new Minister of Education Alexander Lomaya, who used to head the Georgian Office of the Soros Foundation, was not a zealous supporter of the document. He wanted to draw a line between secular secondary education and religion. In one of his interviews he pointed out that he was not only opposed to religious lessons in schools, but also preferred to keep Georgian hagiography from the school courses of Georgian literature (since Soviet times, Georgian schoolchildren have become acquainted with the masterpieces of Georgian hagiographic literature). The minister called hagiographic works “dead texts” and went as far as saying that “history contains a lot of rubbish.” Naturally enough the public negatively responded to the minister’s unethical and superficial pronouncements. It turned out that the high official had meager knowledge of the history of his own country: when asked by journalist Sharashia during

¹² *Sakartvelos Respublika*, 11 September, 2003 (in Georgian).

¹³ [<http://www.iberieli.org.ua/ru/?do=snews&id=1332>].

¹⁴ [http://patriarchate.ge/nc/akt_sinoda.htm].

¹⁵ For the Georgian original and Russian translation see the Portal-Credo.ru Web site.

a live TV show about the first czar of united Georgia, he failed to supply the name. A considerable part of the public and the GOC found it hard to accept other measures the minister carried out to reform the educational system. There is tension in the relations between him and the Church. Many people look at Mr. Lomaya as the embodiment of cosmopolitanism and globalism, which are competing with Georgian traditions, culture, and the Orthodox faith. This was why teachers, parents of schoolchildren, and students gathered outside the ministry's building to demand Mr. Lomaya's resignation. The Liberty Institute mentioned above and the youth organization Kmara sided with the minister.

The minister had to retreat from his uncompromising positions and enter into a dialog with the GOC. In January 2005, the Church and the Ministry of Education signed a memorandum on cooperation in the sphere of school education. Patriarch Ilya II wanted it to be made more specific in order to put the principles of the two documents (the concordat and the memorandum) into practice. He pointed out that the ceremony of signing the memorandum was merely the first step. It is still unclear how far the sides are prepared to move toward each other and whether they will reach a compromise on the fundamental issues. In any case, education remains the main point where the state and the Church meet for possible fruitful cooperation; at the same time, this sphere remains volatile.

The Religious-Church Policies of “Revolutionary” Power

The political elite which came to power in November 2003 is actively drawing on the religion's political and consolidating potential. The president treats the GOC with a blend of Byzantine popery of Caesars and American Civil Religion. Let's discuss this in the right order.

Eduard Shevardnadze was deposed on 23 November, on St. George's Day; Aslan Abashidze was forced to emigrate on 6 May, another St. George's Day. Inspired by this coincidence, I. Okruashvili, the president's "right hand" (now Minister of Defense), predicted in front of TV journalists that before the next St. George's Day (23 November) Eduard Kokoyta would be expelled from Tskhinvali. In the fight against Shevardnadze and his government Mikhail Saakashvili's National Movement was actively using the cross, one of the Christian symbols. Later, the flag with five crosses was accepted as the official flag of Georgia (the Muslim minority—Azeris and Ajarian Georgians—did not object). Today, once a week every school holds a hoisting of the flag ceremony. The president himself can be seen in different churches at all turning points in the country's policies. His pompous inauguration began in the Helati monastery built by Czar David IV the Builder, the most beloved of the Georgian monarchs. It was in the Kashveti Church in Tbilisi that he announced "national reconciliation," on the anniversary of the Rose Revolution he addressed the Ukrainians in Ukrainian from the new St. Trinity Cathedral in Tbilisi, and it was in the same cathedral that the president made his political statement in connection with the death of Premier Zhvania. In most cases, the president is greeted with a red carpet in front of a church. Recently, he started kissing the Patriarch's hand (even Minister of Education Lomaya learned to do the same). In the fall of 2004, at a reception of representatives of NGOs critically disposed toward the Patriarchy and the GOC in general, the president said that nobody should interfere in the Church's affairs.¹⁶ This confirms that the disagreements between the Patriarchy and the president personally have been resolved. By making these statements, the president moved away from his "liberal" supporters. It seems that among other things he realized that the public did not approve of the pressure on the Church.

¹⁶ He said the same when opening the spring 2005 parliamentary session and described the Patriarch's neutrality during the Rose Revolution as a "civil act of heroism."

The impression is created that the president's policies take into account the interests of Orthodox Christianity as the country's key religion. A closer inspection, however, reveals that he is following in the footsteps of Shevardnadze's religious policies (if he had any at all). On the one hand, he demonstrates his respect to the church; on big religious holidays he can be seen in a church with a candle in hand; he meets the GOC half-way on property and money issues; while on the other, he is stalling on the most urgent issues—education and the sects. In fact, Mikhail Saakashvili has demonstrated what can be called at least ignorance of Orthodox Christianity or even disrespect of this religion: on two occasions he stood in church with his back to the altar and gave political speeches not agreed on in advance with the clergy. No wonder Basil Mkalavishvili was arrested inside the church built on his parish money: law enforcement bodies used a bulldozer to enter the church, thus desecrating it and the icons. The police and state security officers mercilessly beat up those who defended the church, mainly women. At all times in Georgia, churches and other holy places have been respected. The public was divided over the fact of Mkalavishvili's arrest (he was recently sentenced to six years in prison) because he raided meetings of sect members. Few people, however, approved of the barbarian methods used to arrest him.

The above suggests that many of the president's symbolic actions (and power as a whole) related to the religious sphere have nothing in common with the spirit of Orthodox Christianity. They can be described as an attempt to turn the Church into a political instrument. This is a Byzantine tradition that comes close to the phenomenon of "Civil Religion" in the United States, which means a "combination of elements of faith, symbols, and rituals which ties citizens to a political community and, in the final analysis, legitimizes this community as represented by its institutions and representatives."¹⁷ Civil Religion supports "the idea that keeps the nation together as a single whole."¹⁸ At the same time, there is the opinion that Civil Religion is merely "a faith of order" rather than "a faith of salvation" (which is Christianity), and that Civil Religion is a "deistic religion of burgher consciousness."¹⁹ I am convinced that an attempt to plant the principles of Civil Religion diluted with Byzantine traditions and more or less adjusted to "local specifics" is fraught with a sharp rebuff from the large part of society who are oriented toward Orthodox Christianity, and not only as their "personal faith."²⁰ It is resolutely opposed to imported values that have nothing in common with Christian Orthodox values and principles.

The GOC, it turns, does not want to be drawn into domestic political conflicts; it is trying to defuse volatile situations while remaining neutral by calling on the sides to enter into negotiations and even offering its mediation. (This happened in particular during a crisis between the Georgian leaders and Aslan Abashidze, head of Ajaria.) On different occasions the Church achieved different results.²¹

Key Conclusions

There is no direct danger of a religious confrontation in the country; and there can be no confrontation along Christianity-Islam, Christianity-Judaism, etc. lines. There are practically no religious

¹⁷ M. Brocker, "Zivilreligion—missionarisches Sendungsbewusstsein—christlicher Fundamentalismus? Religiöse Motivlagen in der (Außen-)politik George W. Bushs," *Zeitschrift für Politik*, Heft 2, Munich, 2003, S. 122.

¹⁸ Ibidem. Here is an interesting parallel: Civil Religion has boosted American patriotism ("America, the freest country of the world," etc. See: *ibid.*, S. 123). Saakashvili, too, is trying to boost Georgian patriotism with slogans of the "Ours is the finest flag in the world!" "Ajarians are the best Europeans!" type.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ Cf. topical processes of "deprivatization" and politicization of religion in Latin America, the U.S. and Europe (U. Willems, M. Minkenber, *Politik und Religion im Übergang—Tendenzen und Forschungsfragen am Beginn des 21. Jahrhunderts*; Dies. (Hrsg.), 2003, s. o., S. 14).

²¹ The authority of the GOC proved insufficient to stem the confrontation of 1991-1993; it was more successful when it called for not using force during the "revolutionary" events in Tbilisi and later in Batumi.

overtone in the ethnic conflicts in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali. There is an obvious confrontation, however, between Orthodox Christianity and Catholicism, as well as with the Protestants: Vatican emissaries are convinced that the rights of Catholics in Georgia are violated,²² while in 2002 the GOC deliberately defeated an interstate agreement between Georgia and Vatican. There is a conflict between Orthodox Christianity and foreign sects, which causes confrontation inside the GOC and disagreements between it and the state. The West, which under the guise of freedom of conscience is supporting the sects working in Georgia, is making things worse: this may fan anti-Western sentiments in society. The Georgian public fears the encroachment of alien cultures and values.

On the whole, this tension should not be overestimated since the followers of non-Orthodox Christian trends and sects are few and far between. In fact, the tension is caused by the inappropriately high (taking into account their numbers) level of the latter's activity at the political level too.

²² [<http://www.civil.ge/rus/article.php?id=3320>]. It should be noted that the non-Orthodox confessions keep together.