

## RELIGION IN GEORGIA'S SOCIOPOLITICAL LIFE

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Christianity was brought to Georgia by Apostles Andrew the First Called, Simon of Canaan, and Matthias. St. Nino of Cappadocia completed the Christianization process. Early in the 4th century, Christianity officially became the state religion and throughout the country's history played a huge role in Georgia's sociopolitical life. So it can be considered one of the older Christian states.

For many centuries the Georgians, encircled by enemies who professed a different religion and repeatedly tried to subjugate them and impose Islam on them, remained loyal to their faith. Christianity became a symbol of Georgia's independence. At the same time, Georgia is a multinational and multi-confessional country; from time immemorial it has been populated by many different ethnic groups which followed different religions; some of them rooted in distant past are still very much alive. Jews brought Judaism to Georgia, Armenians belonged to the Armenian Apostolic Church, Arabs brought Islam to Georgia, which the local Muslims still confess; and the Catholic Church reached Georgia when Europe displayed a particular interest in our country.

When Russia used force to accede Georgia in 1801, Protestant and other sects began infiltrating Georgia: the Mennonites, Molokans, Dukhobortsy, and later Baptists, Pentecostals, and Adventists. Recently, the Jehovah's Witnesses, Krishnaists, etc. have appeared. At first there were no Georgians among them; over time, however, the situation changed. Today, a lot of Georgians have embraced Catholicism, or become Baptists, Pentecostals, Old Believers, Evangelicals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Krishnaists, Muslims, etc. The Georgian state and the Georgian nation have invariably demonstrated tolerance of members of other ethnic groups and confessions. There has been no enmity among them: Georgians and Jews have been living side by side for twenty-six centuries. Religious tolerance in Georgia is best illustrated by the fact that Georgian Christian Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic churches, a Catholic cathedral, a synagogue, and a mosque all function in Tbilisi.

Georgian historians write that at all times religious tolerance was taken for granted, so it was never mentioned in the Georgian historical sources, while amazed foreigners never failed to mention the Georgians' religious tolerance, humanity, and hospitality. In the final count, these features saved Georgia from total extinction. Georgian historians commonly quote from a French traveler, Jean Chardin: "It seems that these Georgian properties are rooted in the traditional freedom of religion typical of their country."<sup>1</sup>

Religious tolerance and the acceptance of alien customs, interests, and way of life have survived over the centuries. Anatoly Sobchak, who chaired a commission of the U.S.S.R. Congress of People's Deputies sent to study the causes of the tragic events of 9 April, 1989 in Tbilisi, said in a TV interview: "The Georgians stand out among all the trans-Caucasian nations because of their

<sup>1</sup> A. Dumas, *The Caucasus*, Tbilisi, 1987, p. 15 (in Georgian).

religious tolerance.” He repeated this in an article that appeared in *Ogonek* magazine: “From time immemorial, Georgia has stood out because of its ethnic tolerance. For many centuries it has been home to hundreds of thousands of Armenians, Azeris, Abkhazes, and other peoples. Despite this, there have never been ethnic conflicts... Georgians have always been marked by a high level of religious tolerance.”<sup>2</sup>

Recent events again confirmed the Georgians’ tolerance: despite the grave consequences of the bloody clashes during the Georgian-Osset and Georgian-Abkhazian conflicts inspired by Russia’s aggressive forces, the Georgians never developed hatred of the Ossets, Abkhazes, or Russians.

This raises some pertinent questions: Has the Georgians’ desire for revenge been atrophied? Why did they not feel hatred toward their enemies, and why did they never create “an enemy image” as happened in Abkhazia and Ossetia? These questions call for well-substantiated answers—to provide them we should look back into our past. Tolerance was not imposed on the nation by a czar or a public figure, nor is it a chance feature. It is a product of many centuries of deliberate efforts conditioned by Georgia’s adverse situation: its location at a geographical crossroads, being surrounded by aggressive neighbors, and having to deal with mass migrations and the ensuing ethnic diversity. The country has always been a multi-religious unit that needed tolerance to live in peace: ethnic and confessional relations could have caused a lot of problems. These processes had to be controlled; relations with the ethnic groups which came to settle in Georgia had to be well organized.

Under these conditions, the country either had to be strong enough to suppress all alien elements to preserve its specific features and independence, or display tolerance and flexibility in order to incorporate these alien elements to the benefit of the state, even if this required certain concessions. Georgian historians were quite right when they wrote that even while the Georgian state was fairly powerful at certain times, it has never been strong enough to use force against all the different ethnic groups on its territory. Therefore it opted for a more flexible and more reasonable way—religious tolerance—to achieve its aim: using the newcomers in the interests of the state.

Some believe that tolerance of other nationalities is explained by the fact that the newcomers (Armenians, Jews, and Muslims) never invaded the Georgians’ traditional economic niche and were mostly engaged in trade and handicrafts. The Georgian rulers who wanted to develop the skills their country needed preferred to steer clear of the aliens’ faith. In other words, ethnic diversity did affect, to a certain degree, the Georgians’ lifestyle, traditions, customs, and national character and taught them to be tolerant. The Georgians stopped looking at other nationalities as alien elements, never envied them, and never fought them. As distinct from many other countries, Georgia never at any time persecuted people of other nationalities.

Georgian historians have pointed out that religious tolerance became a state policy under David the Kuropalat. The trend became especially obvious under David the Builder. An Arabian historian wrote that when Tbilisi was acceded to Georgia in 1122, David the Builder granted privileges to the Tbilisi Muslims; and Islam was offered state protection, while the Georgians were instructed to treat it with respect. People of other faiths were not allowed to visit the bath-houses or to slaughter pigs in the Muslim part of the town. On Fridays, the Muslims were to pray for the Caliph and the Sultan, and not for the Georgian czar; they also paid lower taxes than the Georgians. The same author wrote that David the Builder respected Muslim theologians and Sufis. According to other sources (Ibn-al-Djauzi, for example), the czar not only read the Koran: on Fridays, he went with his son Demetre to the mosque and donated great sums of money to it. According to the same source, the czar gave palaces to prophets, Sufis, and ascetics. If a Muslim left the city, the czar gave him money, and in general he treated the Muslims better than many of the Muslim rulers.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ogonek*, No. 7, 1990.

Armenians were similarly treated; the czar helped them restore their persecuted church. Jews enjoyed the same rights as the Christians and were even granted tax privileges.

Religious tolerance was a state policy, even though some historians believe that the final aim was to make all aliens Christians. (Allegedly the Georgian rulers preferred to rule a state in which everyone confessed the same faith and even surreptitiously tried to convert Armenians to Orthodox Christianity.) Even if this was true, no radical steps were taken. The scheme failed; the Georgian rulers opted for religious tolerance, while people of other nationalities who lived in Georgia never clashed with the titular nation.

The Georgian sources rightly wrote that before Georgia joined Russia, the policy of tolerance was a rational choice. This made it possible for the state to survive under arduous conditions and preserve its specific features. The Georgians were never isolated or embittered; they never hated their neighbors. We should, however, distinguish between the types of tolerance typical of Georgia not only before, but also after it joined Russia, when the situation changed dramatically. Czarist autocracy acted according to the “divide and rule” principle and tried to sow enmity among the local peoples, while assuming the role of a third force. There were attempts to replace all local tongues with the Russian language.

The results were negative: ethnic tension created doubts about the ethnic policies Georgia pursued earlier. Religious tolerance was questioned, along with the Georgians’ acceptance of alien roots. Why did the Georgians retreat in the face of newcomers; why did alien ethnic groups feel more comfortable than the local people; wasn’t this policy an impermissible luxury for a small and ill-protected country; didn’t it foster its enemies itself? These doubts fed by the numerous misfortunes plaguing our independent state are still alive. The questions can be rephrased: To what extent does Georgians’ tolerance help them preserve their national specifics? Were we right to help others (often to our own detriment) develop economically and culturally, allow them to have their own press and theater, and help them attain places in higher educational establishments?

This support allowed other nationalities to consider Georgia their own country. They did not feel grateful, however; they tried to insist on their own interests at the expense of the local people. While this was allowed they were satisfied; but as soon as Georgian self-awareness began to revive, they started protesting and even opposing the process.

The language of the third force played an especially negative role: “National subjugation and oppression of the local people is a relatively novel phenomenon in the history of international relations,” wrote Academician Ivane Javakishvili.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, such facts were absent during the earlier stages of Georgian history. It was czarist autocracy that began suppressing the Georgian in favor of the Russian language used in record keeping, administration, courts, churches, etc. The area in which the Georgian tongue was used shrank dramatically. In the past, it was absolutely necessary for the non-Georgians to speak Georgian; over time, Russian became the key to success. The Georgians preserved their native tongue, yet it became superfluous for the non-Georgians.

At first glance, the Georgian language underwent development during Soviet power: it acquired scientific vocabulary and was the language of Georgian fiction, yet it could not be used to communicate with other nations. The knowledge of Russian was needed to work in other Soviet republics, to serve in the army, to defend a thesis, etc.

The peoples of the autonomies within Georgia likewise abandoned the Georgian and even their own tongues to switch to Russian. Most Armenians, Azeris, Greeks, and Kurds sent their children to Russian schools, since the Georgian language stopped being indispensable in the republic. The graduates of Russian schools had poor knowledge of their own native languages. They did not know Georgian either, which made them the bastion of the third force (they were all united by the Russian lan-

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<sup>3</sup> Iv. Javakishvili, *History of the Georgian Nation*, Book Five, Tbilisi, 1953, p. 126 (in Georgian).

guage). In this way, the Center was able to knock together so-called international fronts in the non-Russian republics, through which it pursued its own aims.

Thank goodness the Soviet Union disintegrated in December 1991. Nearly fifteen years have passed since the day Georgia became independent. We can forget about the third force's impertinence, even though in many spheres its influence is still felt. We are doing our best to overcome its pernicious influence. If we succeed, forbearance and religious tolerance will no longer look outmoded or defeatist political instruments. They will become factors of generous, humane, and genuinely international Georgian policies, the hallmarks of the Georgians' high morality, balanced and rational nature, and kindness. This policy will bring practical dividends in the Georgians' relations with other nationalities inside the country. We should always bear in mind that forbearance in general and religious tolerance in particular have always been, and remain, the most important factors in the Georgian nation's viability.

When we abandoned the communist world outlook, however, and our religious organizations became free to openly preach their ideas, other problems appeared in the state's sociopolitical context. Today there is no peace among the confessions, despite the past religious tolerance. The main, Christian Orthodox Church, has certain grievances against other traditional faiths—Judaism, Islam, the Armenian Apostolic Church, and Catholicism. There are certain unresolved problems related to the ownership of old churches, the building of new ones, church property, etc. Relations with the so-called non-traditional religions are even worse: their followers encounter tough competition. The country's main church accuses other faiths of encroachment on its historical rights and of illegal proselytism.

Today, all confessions have become involved in a marathon aimed at winning over as many believers as possible; they are out to broaden their sphere of influence in order to improve their financial situation. They are pouring their talents, energies, and abilities into this marathon; each has its own considerations and "irrefutable" arguments. The Christian Orthodox Church insists on its traditional presence in Georgia, which dates back to ancient times; it argues that it guided the Georgians in their arduous and dangerous journey and helped them preserve their tongue, ethnic specifics, religion, religious festivals, and way of life. The Christian Orthodox Church insists that Orthodoxy is the only God-inspired teaching of light and truth. Its enemies describe this as a sign of weakness. They are convinced that Orthodoxy has become fossilized; it fails to respond to the changing world, it has become a museum exhibit of sorts, intolerant of all other faiths. The opponents of Christian Orthodoxy argue that 21st century man cannot live according to the rules of the 4th or 5th centuries. The Orthodox Church responds with the following: the Divine word and the Divine truth have been sent to mankind once and for all and cannot be changed. The enemies of Christian Orthodoxy counter those who say that Orthodoxy is the Georgians' national religion with assertions that there is no specifically Georgian Christian Orthodoxy; that Orthodoxy is a shared denomination of the Greeks, Russians, Serbs, etc. since all of them share the same dogmas, Typikon, and feasts.

In the absence of a common enemy—atheism, which described all religions as an ugly remnant of the past—the struggle between confessions became embittered. The beginning of this marathon merits special attention. On the one side, there are religious organizations backed by powerful religious centers (mainly foreign) which rely on their rich experience of luring people away from other faiths and huge financial resources. While on the other, there is the Georgian Christian Orthodox Church defamed by czarist autocracy and the Russian Orthodox Church and suppressed by the communists. Certain other structures have also gained prominence due to these obviously unequal starting conditions and acquired many new Georgian members. Irritated by successes of aliens on its canonic territory, the Georgian Orthodox Church demanded that the state legally register its special role in a treaty under which the state should assume responsibility for the priority of Christian Orthodoxy in Georgia. In this way, the Georgian Christian Orthodox Church tried to protect itself against the onslaught of

other religious trends, attack them, and outlaw the most dangerous and annoying of them, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Some of the persecuted organizations tried to protect themselves by referring to international law and the documents relating to religious minorities. Others complained to their donor states (America, Britain, Germany, etc.), which may even retaliate by cutting short their financial aid to Georgia. It should be said that the apologists of religious minorities are not always straightforward; they are busy luring people away from other religions and even trying to enlist atheists. Members of the Jehovah's Witnesses are not alien to door-to-door propaganda in order to tell people about the coming Armageddon.

The Orthodox Church lacks a social program, which undermines its position: today, when a handful of "masters of the situation" have appropriated the country's riches, leaving the common people to starve in the absence of adequate wages or pensions and to fend for themselves amid the incomprehensible reforms and much more expensive and much more inferior education and health services, large masses of people have been deprived of consolation and hope. Today, it is hardly wise to talk about the after-life as the Church's main concern and leave out the social sphere. Other confessions concentrate on people's earthly concerns and try to lighten the burden of everyday life. Some of the charities (the Salvation Army and the Jehovah's Witnesses) are especially successful in this.

This confrontation pushed some of the Orthodox believers toward radical measures and the use of force. I have in mind, first and foremost, Basil Mkalavishvili's group known as the Gldanskaia Eparchy Under the Open Sky. Its members refuse to obey the Patriarchy, they burn religious literature of other confessions (the Jehovah's Witnesses and Baptists) in public, carry around crosses and slogans, interfere with the media they disapprove of, etc. Some other structures officially detached themselves from the Patriarchy and call themselves the Orthodox Church of Georgia, even though they found a new master in Boston, U.S.A.

The struggle in the religious sphere is going on with no end in sight. The present government has resolved to stick to the Constitution, which speaks of freedom of conscience, people's right to freely confess any faith, and the rights of religious minorities. The authorities have already started a criminal procedure against Basil Mkalavishvili's extremist group; and he himself is facing a sentence of seven years in prison. Today, there are no religious clashes in Georgia, yet tension persists, while the processes in this sphere remain uncontrolled.

The current developments are caused by the clergy's natural response to the lack of rights of all religious organizations and by their desire to find an adequate niche in the new context. Success depends on the domestic situation: the social conditions should be improved to where people no longer need to abandon the faith defended by their ancestors in favor of an alien confession in order to prevent themselves from starving. Religious conflicts will disappear along with the social problems. People should be allowed to choose their faith freely, without undue interference.

In a strong and united multi-ethnic and multi-confessional state, people should not be divided into categories according to their religious beliefs. So far, Georgia cannot achieve this ideal: its territorial integrity has been disrupted; not all its regions are under the central power's jurisdiction; there are zones of conflict; there are foreign military bases on its territory; industrial enterprises are idling; a large part of the nation is living on the brink of destitution; many are starving; a lot of people commit suicide in desperation. This is fertile soil for ethnic and religious conflicts, since when driven to despair people are apt to look for enemies among other ethnic groups and followers of other religions.

There is still hope that life will improve; that religious confrontation will ebb away; and that genuinely democratic, humane, and tolerant Georgia will be revived and join other civilized states.