

# Transformation of Religion in Georgia

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Viewed over the last two or three decades religious life in Georgia can be described as a process during which its religious organizations have been adjusting to the changing historical and social contexts. They have gradually shed the old Soviet ideas and moved toward so-called market principles. During this process there have

been elements that could be described as radicalization. Georgian society stepped into the new reality after independence. Some groups in and out of the church have had a hard time adapting to that reality. There were reactions in society, which caused confrontation between religious groups. However, seen as a whole, the

process has never reached the level of religious radicalization and is better described as a process of transformation.

Georgia, a small country in South Caucasus, has frequently been the subject of religious discussion. New York Times journalist Allen Barry discussed it as a backward country with old-fashioned traditions (Barry, 2011).

Another author, Mikhail Vignansky, described it as if he Georgian Patriarchate was fighting against Sectarians. There are several reports written on this issue. The following paper will argue that there is no religious radicalism in the country, but the movements that are going on are matched with the transformation of the religion more than with religious nationalism or radicalism.

The Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC), as the largest and most influential organization, tried to stem the omnipresent market trends and insist on its own ideas. Meanwhile the GOC and each of the religious organizations have come face to face with globalization and the far from simple geopolitical context in which the country has to live and develop.

The prevailing descriptions of this process suggested two key strategies that determine (fully or partially) the country's religious life. On the one hand, the religious minorities are obviously working toward a liberal religious market in order to acquire more rights and free actions. On the other, the Georgian Orthodox Church is out to prevent this in order to preserve its traditional role and dominance.

It is hard to determine the exact size of the religious communities in present day Georgia, because the only official poll used about the subject is done in 2002. In the 2002 General National Population Census of the State Department for Statistics of Georgia, the religious structure of the country's population was determined for the first time. After

consulting several sources, I have determined that these are the most accurate numbers:

- Orthodox 83.9 % (3, 666, 233)
- Muslims 9.9 % (433, 784)
- Apostolic Armenians 3.9 % (171, 139)
- Catholics 0.8 % (34, 727)
- Jewish 0.1 % (3541)
- "Other" 0.8 % (33648)
- Non-Believers 0.6 % (28631) ([www.GeoStat.ge](http://www.GeoStat.ge) 2002).

The only organization which has done a new poll is the International Republican Institute (IRI), although this survey is not oriented on religion. The organization has made the Georgian National Survey in 2010, which includes information about main religious groups. The IRI survey was conducted nation-wide and it counted 1500 permanent Georgian residents eligible to vote. According to this poll 85% of the population are Orthodox Christians, 11% Muslims, and 4% are of other confession (Georgian National Survey, 2010).

Georgia is a country which went through difficult development before it became an independent state. Religious groups also had a different history in the Soviet, Post-Soviet and independence eras.

In the post-Soviet era there were several circumstances caused by the adaptation crisis that finally created the current religious context.

First, Georgian society, like the larger part of the formerly Soviet population, lived for 70 years in a constrictive historical space with limited ideas about the global processes and unable to contribute to them. In the first years of independence it found itself isolated, with philosophical and cultural paradigms which turned out to be different from what most of Georgian society expected. Many of the products of globalization, especially those that demanded revision of the traditional cultural and religious values were rejected as unacceptable. Some

members of the church community were moving toward an ideology that rejected globalization and liberalism as unwelcome. They expressed their fear of losing traditional ties, which were very important for the country. This was the reason why they were so opposed to the new sects coming to the country.

The 1990s were a time when liberal-minded religious figures also moved to the fore within the Georgian Orthodox Church; their active efforts and frequent criticism of the Church policies failed to dent the religious process and convince the public. Most church figures and believers remained convinced that the liberals were resolved to undermine the nation's cultural and religious identity rather than to remedy the situation.

There are other traditional religious organizations (Muslims, Apostolic Armenians, Catholics, Jews), but GOC displayed more reserve with respect to the religious market. On the one hand, they were naturally concerned about the aggressive missionaries of the new religious movements; on the other, the liberalized market protected them against the mounting aggressive religious nationalism.

In the post-Soviet era the number of believers increased in Georgia. After a period of silence under Soviet rule, the influence of religion on society has risen steadily, after the country's independence in 1991 as an important part of the Georgian national identity. As individuals have rights to express beliefs, according to the IRI Survey only 16% of those inquired said they did not attend religious services, while 45% attended regularly (Georgian National Survey, 2010).

The fact that the number of believers in Georgia has considerably increased speaks volumes about the country's religious life. Despite the fact that the absolute majority regards itself as Orthodox Christians, due to cultural and historical traditions the number of those who follow

Orthodoxy for purely religious reasons is growing rapidly. According to all opinion polls the Orthodox Church enjoys the greatest trust of the nation: in 2003, in the wake of the Rose Revolution, it outstripped the president by several points. This means that the number of followers is not the only indicator of the role of religion in Georgia. Since the 21st century the Orthodox Church has obviously been leaving behind its former image as an ethnographic and cultural curiosity to become a social factor in its own right. Today it strongly affects the country's movement toward the global context. According to the International Republican Institute poll, 91% of the population considers GOC as the most favorable institution in the country (Georgian National Survey, 2010).

In the last 20 years minority religions have lost many adherents, while GOC has gained them. Just as many non-Georgians have "georgianized" their names, a number of Georgians of non-orthodox origin have converted to orthodoxy for safety or for the purpose of avoiding ostracism. Today, the phenomenon is blatant in Adjara, the breakaway region which returned to Tbilisi's control in 2004. In July 2006, the third mass conversion took place in Kobuleti and 300 Muslims embraced the Orthodox faith.

In contrast the Georgian Catholic Community has decreased significantly. If there were 90 000 - 100 000 Catholics before Communism, there are only 35 000 left. Similarly the numbers of the Jewish Community have also fallen; from 100 000 Jews there are only left 3 500, after the emigration in 1970s and 1980s.

According to its legal status, the Christian Orthodox Church stands above all other religious organizations. This sometimes causes a radical approach among the Orthodox Church and other religious communities. Since 2002, the constitution has given the Orthodox Church an exceptional legal status, one which no other religion has received.

In terms of losing ground and being officially discriminated against, other religious groups have expressed different demands. Protestant, Baptist and Muslim organizations have chosen to register themselves as NGOs. Catholics and Armenian Apostolics, among others, have been claiming the same legal titles as the Orthodox Church with no success.

Social attitudes toward religious minorities can be described as historically tolerant toward groups that have a longer history in Georgia - Apostolic Armenians, Muslims Catholics and Jews. In contrast, the attitude is widely intolerant toward other religious groups, which are seen as sectarian. The main reason behind such intolerance appears to be the fact that these groups are seen as a threat to the Georgian Orthodox Church and thus to Georgian national identity (Vischioni, Low 2006).

Relations between the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Muslim and Jewish communities deserve special discussion. Today, as in the past, they live side by side, always prepared to close ranks at times of crises. In a personal interview, Rabbi Meir Kozlovsky said that, Jewish community has no problems living in Georgia. They have their schools and Synagogue. Jewish people never feel disrespected. This is one of the best relations that two religious communities can have (Kozlovsky, 2011).

A hundred or more years ago nobody could speak about radicalization of religions in Georgia. The country was based on one belief - Christian Orthodox Religion - and there were no questions in society. Of course, there were traditional minorities at that time too. However Georgia always had other problems historically. The state together with GOC had always been trying to protect itself from Muslim or other conquerors, rather than fight against religious minorities inside the country.

However, as life goes on, society develops and the development always brings new issues. Religious confrontation has become a new issue. As it is mentioned above, it started in Georgia mainly in the 1990s, with the mission of

eradicating heretics including not only sects and Protestantism, but Catholicism as well. Extremist brotherhoods were formed. The Mdzleveli and Jvari organizations target assemblies, meetings, constructions, isolated persons or religious symbols. Jehovah's Witnesses, which have been present in the country since the 1950s, became targets of aggression, just as the Baptists and Seventh-Day Adventists did. In the early 2000s, Ex-Priest Basili Mkalavishvili's attacks on Jehovah's Witnesses reached their apex.

In a personal interview, Beka Mindiashvili, the official responsible for minority affairs in the office of Georgia's human rights ombudsman, said that Basili Mkalavishvili was hired by the Georgian government to act against Jehovah's Witnesses and the GOC was well informed of it. Contrary to what the government often seeks to prove, the highly publicized arrest of ex-priest Basili has not eliminated confrontation. However, the bases for a state of law were laid down and those who commit violent acts are more regularly arrested by the police. That the police do not directly take part in the aggressions and no longer imprison Jehovah's Witnesses is in itself a decisive progress.

It is worth noticing that the violent intervention of the Orthodox groups, like Christian Orthodox Parents' Union in social issues shows that they are trying to present themselves as guardians of the national morale. At the beginning of 2006, fundamentalists attacked the Rustaveli movie theater for having shown the film "The da Vinci Code." The fight against other religions shares the same politics.

In May 2010, discussion and confrontation started in society around the book "Saidumlo Siroba" - the name is a play on the Georgian for "Last Supper" and could be translated as "Holy Crap". The representatives of Orthodox Christian Parents' Union called for the banning of the book and Liberty Institute advocated for free speech campaigns.

In February 2011 Christian Orthodox Parents' Union protested against Georgian TV station Imedi's program. They wanted the channel to cancel the program about sex.

GOC does not recognize the actions of the Union of Christian Orthodox parents. Father George Samanishvili, Priest of Sioni Cathedral, states that the church knows about their actions but it has no leverage to stop them, as they are not connected with the church. Moreover, certain extremist priests are still widely active.

While violent acts are the work of marginal groups, certain observers consider them to be brought on by the climate of intolerance flooding Georgian society. Although many politicians consider the remedy to involve strengthening the State, Emil Adkhanov, a human rights activist, finds that the problem is much more complex: "It is necessary to proceed with the general education of the society, as in the Age of Enlightenment. Ignorance is the basis of intolerance."

In 2010, the President of Georgia announced Azerbaijan holiday Novruz as a national holiday for the country. This is a step forward, as the Muslim minority is the second largest one after the Orthodox population. Still, there are some important recommendations the state policy lacks.

Number one is equal law enforcement for all religious organizations. Government has to apply one tax policy to all religious groups. If GOC is free from taxes, other groups have to be free as well.

Media has a very influential role in increasing tolerance in the country. Nowadays, media broadcasts are only about Orthodox holidays, churches etc. The public broadcaster of Georgia should present educational programs about all religions, to increase awareness in society. As lack of education is the basis of intolerance, media could play a positive role in this development.

According to all the above mentioned facts and analyses, one can conclude that society in Georgia is indeed in transition. The changes that took place in the past years were unimaginable two decades ago. A dynamic society draws attention to many different things. Education and knowledge always bring new questions and those questions cause changes in the political, economic or religious life of society.

There is no country in the world where different ideas do not exist. Difference is also necessary - for example, left wing ideas need the right wing to maintain equilibrium. A healthy and active society always has variety inside. In the states where religious radicalism is blooming, it is the number one issue. However, in Georgia, surveys and statistics are done on economic and political matters. It means that there is no escalation in this regard and people who belong to religious minorities are more concerned about other things than religion. In Georgian Statistics Department there is no plan by the government or another organization to do new surveys about religion in the country.

The process that is going on in Georgia after the soviet period can be explained through the 70 years information vacuum. Most of the population tries to fill the gap and it is sometimes overwhelmed. Religion in this country is clearly connected to national identity, which is why there are reactions against other religious groups. If we get back to the definition of religious nationalism, there is no proof that it exists in the country, but taking into account the above mentioned facts, we can see that there are many different ideas and movements in religious terms. Those ideas will spread faster and faster as society develops more. Therefore, there is no major radicalization in Georgian society right now, but transformation is taking place. It is very likely the population will adjust to new realities better and in a more civilized manner, proper ways will be adopted to communicate with all other religious groups. Transformation of the religion will help a

transitional society. This society has to grow up, meet new challenges and form in the way it will continue developing in the future.

Note: In the beginning of July 2011, Georgian ruling United Movement Party proposed a set of legal amendments about religious minority groups in Georgia. The Georgian parliament approved the law by first reading on July 1. The law granted a legal status under so-called “public law” to five religious groups that have historic ties with Georgia: the Muslim and Jewish communities, the Roman Catholic Church, Armenian Apostolic Church and Evangelical Baptist Church. As mentioned in the text above, those groups could only register as non-governmental organizations and they have called for a long time to be given the same privileges as the Georgian Orthodox Church.

The amendments were described as unexpected by the Orthodox Church. Georgian Orthodox Church Patriarch Ilia II on July 4 called for parliament to postpone the vote until public discussions and the formation of a governmental commission to study the proposed change would take place. Several hundred Georgian Orthodox Christians rallied on July 4 against changes in the law. However, the law was adopted on July 5 without any consultations (Lomsadze, 2011).

Governing party lawmakers said that believers of all religious minorities would have equal rights, and the changes have been welcomed by the country's main international supporters: the United States and the Council of Europe.

Expert on Caucasus Mamuka Areshidze stated on the issue: “Democracy includes in it a conditional term, which is another moral value for the nation. Orthodox Christianity is this historical value for Georgia, because 83% of the population is Orthodox. I am sure that the Georgian Government could only benefit if it agreed to the decision of the Patriarchate.” (Areshidze, 2011)

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