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A strip of land situated between the Mediterranean and the Black Seas, the post-Soviet Caucasus embarked on a painful identity quest at the turn of the third millennium. This – still ongoing – quest involves several daunting choices: between Moscow, Washington and Brussels, between oil and democratic values, and between feudal realities and revolutionary ideals. Throughout the last decade, the Yerevan-based Caucasus Institute has been conducting in-depth research of the conflicting and often subtle trends in the regions' politics. This volume contains a selection of research papers published by the Caucasus Institute since 2001 in Armenian, Russian and English, which best represent the challenges faced by this varied region at this crucial stage of development.

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MOVING IN SEVERAL DIRECTIONS AT ONCE: RELIGION IN GEORGIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY¹

By Ivlian Khaindrava²

Despite the pretentious title, this paper does not in any way purport to offer a comprehensive review of religion and politics in Georgia; fulfilling such a task would require writing a monograph, or even several. Besides, drawing a detailed and objective picture would be difficult anyway, as the situation with religion is extremely controversial even in comparison to other spheres of public and political life of Georgia. Considering that there are more than enough contradictions in Georgia, we can use a less-than-original metaphor: Georgian citizens today are like the passengers of a departing train who wish to reach different destinations by that same train. Obviously, a train cannot do that.

I will refer to this metaphor at the end of the paper; in the meantime, while attempting to give an idea about the relationship between religion and politics in Georgia, we will take two walks down the streets of Tbilisi.

OVERVIEW OF THE RECENT PAST

First, let us take a tour of the late eighties of the previous century, when the country was swept with national-liberation rallies, protest hunger strikes, demonstrations and manifestations, which became a salient feature of the everyday life in Georgia. Alongside national three-colour (and other historical) flags and portraits of prominent Georgian social and political activists, the Holy Cross became an integral attribute of mass protests.

The triad “motherland, language, faith” put forward as a national slogan by Ilya Chavchavadze in the 19th century, posters and calls similar to “Long live free, democratic, Christian Georgia!” (with minor variations) defined the surface of the national-liberation movement.

To be fair, it should be noted that dissent in Soviet Georgia also contained a

1 This paper was published in Russian as: Khaindrava, Ivlian. “Religiya v Gruzii: XXI vek.” *Religiya i politika na Kavkaze* (“Religion in Georgia: the 21st Century. *Religion and Politics in the Caucasus*). Ed. Alexander Iskandaryan. – Yerevan: Caucasus Media Institute, 2004 (in Russian). – Pp.53-74.

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religious component. Even high-ranking Communist party members had their children baptized, some out of adherence to traditions, and some, assuming that “if God exists, why upset relations with him?” Dissenting human rights activists demanded, amongst other things, respect for freedom of consciousness and religion. Students and the most courageous representatives of intelligentsia set up a movement for the protection of historical monuments, which in Georgia were mostly churches and monasteries. Overall, whether adequately or not, the Georgian Orthodox Church, alongside, perhaps, the Tbilisi Dinamo football team and the Sukhishvili-Ramishvili folk dance group, was perceived as one of the few national institutions that survived during the Soviet times.

Once the Soviet ideology collapsed – a fact virtually officially recognized during the Perestroika - people felt a natural need to fill the resulting ideological vacuum and to find and establish a new identity. That period was characterised by a radical, slogan-based tendency to replace concepts with opposite ones: totalitarianism with democracy, communism with freedom, atheism with faith. Overall, the image of a Soviet person with no roots, no motherland, no God in his heart or his mind, speaking a *lingua franca*, was opposed to the image of an Orthodox Georgian with a glorious ancient history in his backpack. Reduced to sameness in the Soviet times, people of various nationalities were now striving to find their own unique individuality, to revive their historical identity or create a new one. The Baltic nations successfully became Europeans within a short period of time, Ukrainians and Belarussians aspired to prove that they were not Russians; Moldovans tried but failed to identify themselves with Romanians, and Azerbaijanis, with Turks. Georgians were in a more difficult situation, similar perhaps only to that of the Armenians (there was no need to prove non-Russianness and no one to welcome them as “poor relatives”). They decided to present themselves as Orthodox Georgians guarding the eastern outpost of the Christian world.

Religion (in this case, Orthodox Christianity) became the necessary and natural mainstay. However, souls corrupted by the Soviet system did not – and could not – feel an innate willingness to return to the fold. At grassroots level, this return mostly happened in accord with the perceived *Zeitgeist*: people were following the vogue or habitually imitating those who define the country’s political atmosphere, and all the public leaders of the national-liberation movement - Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Merab Kostava, Zurab Chavchavadze, Temur Chkheidze, Gia Chanturia, Irakli Tsereteli - constantly emphasised their devoutness.

There is a reason why I spoke above about the “the surface” of the national-liberation movement while describing its religious component. Amongst the public,

there was (and there still is) no understanding or thorough knowledge of Orthodox Christianity; instead, there is appalling ignorance of religious matters. Only a handful of people are aware of the differences between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches, let alone between the Lutheran and Anglican Churches. Meanwhile, the rest are certain that Orthodox Christianity is the only true religion.

Back then, this surprising manifestation of religious faith drained of its content (here or below, I am by no means aiming to hurt the feelings of genuine believers) suited the formula “Orthodoxy without Christianity” or, “Orthodox atheism” if you will.

This vision is exemplified by a tragic incident that took place during the night on April 9, 1989. When it became obvious that security forces were about to advance on the participants of a hunger strike and supporting protesters, the Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia Ilia II called on the protesters to move to the Cathedral opposite the government house and to pray to God (and thus perhaps avoid blood-letting). The answer was a unanimous “no”! The majority of the protesters were holding lit church candles; right after saying “no” to the Patriarch, they began saying the Lord’s Prayer with thousands of voices chanting in unison. How do you then explain such blatant disobedience of the supreme religious authority?

For better or for worse, after having been a companion of the national-liberation movement, the Georgian Orthodox Church automatically became a companion of the post-Soviet authorities in Georgia. It thus became one of the attributes of the new statehood, defying “the underlying idea of freedom of religion, according to which the principle of political unity of people within one state is not only necessary but sufficient for normal functioning of the state” (Nodar Ladaria).³ It’s characteristic of the times that while neither President Zviad Gamsakhurdia nor his supporters liked Ilia II, the president insisted on the Patriarch’s presence at key events in the parliament (the first session, presidential oath etc). There are two virtually identical photographs in my archive. In one of them, the Patriarch is shown with President Gamsakhurdia, who is taking an oath on the Bible, and in the other one, with President Shevardnadze taking an oath on the Bible. Apart from other things, this means that both of the presidents considered the blessing of the Georgian Orthodox Church instrumental for their legitimacy.

It is only natural that under these circumstances church blessings became the vogue. Major events organised by the authorities and opposition alike, including

3 Ladaria, Nodar. “The Historical Motivation for Freedom of Religion.” *The Church, the State and Religious Minorities in Georgia: Is there a Danger of Religious Fundamentalism?* Ed. Ghia Nodia. – Tbilisi: Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, 2000 (in Georgian). – Pp.7-13.

public gatherings, openings of new facilities, exhibitions, presentations, the laying of foundation stones and so on, seemed to require the presence and involvement of the clergy. I once watched on TV a ceremony in which a priest was blessing a newly-opened... bookmaking office. The next step would have been the blessing of a brothel; fortunately, I have not witnessed that so far. However, a news item by *Prime-News* agency describes an event which, in my opinion, is very similar. I am quoting verbatim, "On Friday, the Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia Ilia II blessed the terrain in the yard of Prosecutor-General's Office in which a church will be built, named after the Holy Tsar Vakhtang Gorgasali. Friday was the official Prosecutor Day. The head of the department of Judicial-Procedural Oversight of the Prosecutor-General's Office, Temur Moniava, told journalists that the construction of the church would start this year. According to him, the construction will be fully funded from donations. Prosecutor Day has been celebrated for sixth years now."⁴

However, our first tour is over. Now let us glance at the legal framework of religious life in Georgia, since the trends prevalent therein reflect the state policy towards religion, if not directly, then at least indirectly.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

International Covenants

In 1994, Georgia ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In 1999, Georgia joined the European Convention on Human Rights.

The Constitution

The Georgian Constitution, which was adopted and came into effect in 1995, looks perfectly benign in terms of religious freedom. E.g.

Preamble

The citizens of Georgia, whose firm will is... to secure universally recognized human rights and freedoms...

Article 14

Everyone is free by birth and is equal before law regardless of race, colour, language, sex, religion, political and other opinions, national, ethnic and social belonging, origin, property and title, place of residence.

4 *Prime-News Agency*, Tbilisi, 30 May 2003 (in Georgian).

Article 19

Everyone has the right to freedom of speech, thought, conscience, religion and belief.

The persecution of a person on the account of his/her speech, thought, religion or belief as well as the compulsion to express his/her opinion about them shall be impermissible.

The restriction of the freedoms enumerated in the present article shall be impermissible unless their manifestation infringes upon the rights of others.

Article 24

1. Everyone has the right to freely receive and impart information, to express and impart his/her opinion orally, in writing or by any other means.

Article 35

Everyone shall have the right to receive education and the right to free choice of a form of education.

Article 38

Citizens of Georgia shall be equal in social, economic, cultural and political life irrespective of their national, ethnic, religious or linguistic belonging.

However, the crucial formulation of the Georgian Constitution with regard to our subject is contained in Article 9:

1. The state shall declare complete freedom of belief and religion, as well as shall recognise the special role of the Apostle Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia in the history of Georgia and its independence from the state.
In 2001, a second clause was added to this article:
2. The relations between the state of Georgia and the Apostle Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia shall be determined by the Constitutional Agreement. The Constitutional Agreement shall correspond completely to universally recognised principles and norms of international law, in particular, in the field of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

We shall later come back to this article of the Constitution, and to the Constitutional Agreement.

Domestic Legislation

The creation of religious organisations is, apparently, regulated by the 1997 Civil Code. According to its *Article 1509*, in particular, legal persons of public law include

non-governmental organizations created on the grounds of legislation for accomplishment of public objectives (political parties, religious associations etc.). However, the 1999 Law on Legal Persons of Public Law does not prescribe a procedure for setting up a religious association as a legal entity. According to the second clause of *Article 5* of this law, a legal person of public law can be created by:

1. *The law;*
2. *The edict of the President of Georgia;*
3. *The administrative act of a state body in case expressly stated by law.*

Clearly, none of the above can serve as a basis for establishing a religious association; the registration issue is thus pending to this day. Things got even worse after a ruling of the Supreme Court of Georgia regarding the registration of Jehovah's Witnesses. The Supreme Court ruled that a religious association *must* be a legal person of public law and may not be registered as a union (association), which is a legal person of private law, as prescribed by the Civil Code. As a result, the registration and legal functioning of religious associations became even more problematic.

Article 101 of the Tax Code makes the Patriarchate of Georgia exempt from VAT but does not mention any other types of religious associations (cf. Article 6, paragraph 5 of the Constitutional Agreement). Article 47 (income tax exemption) also works like that. The 2002 state budget allocated the Patriarchate just under 1 million lari (about 450,000 US dollars); in addition, the Patriarchate got financing from the President's Fund, the city budget of Tbilisi and regional budgets. Various state sources alongside private donations are being used to fund the construction of the Holy Trinity Cathedral.

A key principle prescribed by the Law on Education is the independence of educational institutions from political or religious associations (Article 1). However, according to Article 13 of the same law, the state supports the functioning of church education facilities for the purpose of sustaining and developing the traditions of national culture. The Patriarchate of Georgia participates in designing educational programs and standards. Similar provisions are enshrined in the Constitutional Agreement (Article 5).

According to Article 26 of the Law on Imprisonment, a convict is entitled to engage in religious practices and use any required accessories and literature.

Article 155 of the Criminal Code prescribes penalties for unlawful obstruction of religious practice. Article 166 of the Criminal Code of Georgia prescribes penalties for interfering with the creation and functioning of political, civil or religious associations.

The Law of Georgia on Export and Import of Cultural Property prescribes that in the event of a dispute, a representative of the Patriarchate of Georgia must sit on the expert consultative commission.

Article 2 of the Law on the Protection of Cultural Heritage mentions but does not regulate the relationship between the state and Patriarchate of Georgia, as the owner of a substantial part of the cultural heritage. The Constitutional Agreement covers this relationship in more depth, but still not fully.

Summing up, I would like to quote from a legal review called “Religious Freedom in OSCE member states”: “even a brief overview of the Georgian legislation allows to conclude that the legislation is inconsistent and does not provide sufficient guarantees for freedom of religion; if we recall the existing practice, we can directly state that Georgia still falls very short of international standards of religious freedom.”⁵

Article 9 of the Georgian Constitution and the Constitutional Agreement

During the drafting the Constitution and its adoption by the parliament (the author was a member of parliament in 1992-1995 and a member of the State Constitutional Commission), there were discussions about whether the Constitution should mention the Georgian Orthodox Church, and if so, in what exact words. As in many other matters, a compromise wording was proposed: the Constitution emphasised the unique role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the Georgian history and declared full religious freedom and the independence of the Church from the state. Each side attached its own meaning to this wording: the “secularists” decided that it would take the issue off the table, and the “clericalists” decided that it would allow them to embody the “unique” role of the Church in various legal acts that would boost the role of the Church in public life. The “clericalists” prevailed. On March 30, 2001, the parliament unanimously (with 191 votes) adopted the Law on Amendments and Additions to the Georgian Constitution that added a second clause to Article 9. Though on the same day, the parliament adopted a Decree on Manifestations of Religious Extremism, which prescribes to several government agencies the task of eradicating the growing manifestations of religious violence, it became clear that the situation had changed dramatically. The Georgian Orthodox Church became “the first among equals.” In a nutshell, the Georgian Orthodox Church became the only religion in Georgia to have constitutional status.

On 14 October 2002, a Constitutional Agreement was signed between the state of Georgia (represented by President Shevardnadze) and the Apostolic Auto-

⁵ *Religious Freedom in OSCE Member States. Legal Overview.* – Tbilisi: Freedom Institute, 2002 (in Georgian). – P.9.

cephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia (represented by the Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia Ilia II). The Agreement was ratified by the Georgian parliament on 22 October, 2002, and blessed by the Synod.

While the agreement was being drafted, several European consultants had a look at it. Dr Rick Lawson, Council of Europe expert, Professor of Law, University of Leiden, stated that there was no evident connection between the Georgian Constitution and the Constitutional Agreement.⁶ Another CoE expert, Ringolds Balodis, Dr. of Law, said that the agreement had some resemblance to Italian, Spanish and Polish Catholic concordats. However, in those countries, a law on religious organisations is in place, and the concordat plays the role of a by-law, whereas in Georgia it was raised to the status of a Constitutional Agreement. In addition, it does not properly define the liabilities of the parties, and execution of certain provisions is impossible without amendments to some existing laws or adoption of new ones. For example, under Article 3 of the Agreement, the state recognises marriages made in church; however, relevant procedures and legal consequences (the rights of women and children, property issues) are not defined in the Agreement.⁷

Georgian scholar Zurab Kiknadze considers Article 11 of the Agreement “offensive:” under this Article, the government assumes partial restitution liability. The Patriarchate’s demands for compensation of losses incurred by the Church during the Soviet times perplex Kiknadze, “as if sovietisation, dekulakization, collectivisation, confiscations, pre-war and post-war repressions did not affect the whole population of Georgia, regardless of ethnicity, religious affiliation or social status.”⁸

Without analysing the agreement any further, we can state that its existence *per se* attests, directly and indirectly, to the fact that, in the realm of religious freedom and inter-religious relations, the situation in Georgia is far from rosy and falls short of modern democratic standards. Interestingly, according to many experts and analysts, the constitutional status did not reinforce the position of the Church in but on the contrary, undermined it. According to political scientist Ramaz Sakvarelidze, “There is a risk that the church may reinforce its administrative position but weaken its religious influence (a similar paradox happened in world history many times:

6 Meladze, Giorgiy. “A Legal Analysis of the Agreement between the State of Georgia and the Georgian Autocephalous Orthodox Church.” *Tavisupleba (Freedom)*. – Tbilisi: Liberty Institute, №3, 2002 (in Georgian). – Pp. 20-22.

7 Meladze, Giorgiy. “A Legal Analysis of the Options for the Agreement between the State of Georgia and the Georgian Autocephalous Orthodox Church.” *Tavisupleba (Freedom)*. – Tbilisi: Liberty Institute, №1-2, 2002 (in Georgian). – Pp. 24-30.

8 Kiknadze, Zurab. “The Church and the Law.” *Tavisupleba (Freedom)*. – Tbilisi: Liberty Institute, №1 (13), 2003 (in Georgian). – Pp. 31-43.

inquisition gave birth to European atheism; the Russian church with its administrative power was a forerunner to Communist atheism). Thus, due to the modern policy of the Church, with religious intolerance as one of its main manifestations, the Church risks losing its authority, which is equally dangerous for the Church and for the state.”⁹

In his book called *World Religions in Georgia*, Nugzar Papuashvili writes, “Since perestroika and the awakening of the national-liberation movement, a certain category of the clergy and society have been obsessed with religious-nationalist and religious-rigorous, i.e. ultra-clericalist ideas, emotions and thoughts. These ideas have been upheld by political parties, and an anti-ecumenical front appeared in Georgia. The Catholicos-Patriarch and the Holy Synod met the demands of radicals: on May 20, 1997, the Georgian Orthodox Church left the ranks of the World Council of Churches and the European Conference. An imminent split in the ranks of the Georgian Church was prevented but the problems remained. In the eyes of radicals, ecumenism is not just membership of ecumenical organisations but even a Eucharistic union with churches that participate in the ecumenical movement and do not reject joint prayers with non-orthodox Christians.”¹⁰ However, small-scale schisms could not be prevented, and several groups left the jurisdiction of the Georgian Patriarchate.

A TOUR OF THE PRESENT

So, how did we come to this? To answer this question, let us make another tour: one of Tbilisi in the early 21st century. The followers of a truly deranged schismatic, Basil Mkalashvili, have, with impunity, carried out pogroms at prayer houses of other religions (Jehovah’s Witnesses bore the brunt of the attacks but Baptists and others also suffered). The pogroms, which number in the hundreds already, were ideologically supported by a Member of Parliament, Guram Sharadze, leader of “Our Georgia” movement, who demands, among other things, that Orthodox Christianity be proclaimed the state religion of Georgia. On several occasions, “wrong” religious books were burned. On July 10, 2002, there was a raid on the office of a non-governmental organisation, Liberty Institute, which dared to protect the rights of victims. Those who fight against religious intolerance and violence get verbally abused in the mass media and at various public gatherings...

9 Discussion. Nodia, Ghia (ed.), *op.cit.* – P.49-52.

10 Papuashvili, Nugzar. *World Religions in Georgia*. – Tbilisi: Liberty Institute, 2002 (in Georgian). – P. 95-96.

Meanwhile, law-enforcement and government stand by and watch - in essence, encouraging the abuse. Only recently, criminal charges were filed against Basil Mkalashvili, and court sentenced him to three months of pre-trial detention. Interestingly, (1) Mkalashvili's aggressive supporters huffed and puffed for days but the court's ruling was not overturned, and no cataclysms ensued; (2) Several dozen "soft-hearted" MPs signed a petition for the release of Mkalashvili before trial, thus revealing their moral, intellectual, professional and other qualities; (3) There are reasons to expect that Mkalashvili will become a "martyr" of sorts, and the number of his supporters may increase. There is a limit, though, to the number of people who will openly dare to follow the excommunicated Basil.

Let us make a few finishing touches to this image of Georgian reality. In the summer of 2001, Gigla Baramidze, the then presidential envoy in Samtskhe-Dzhavakheti (simply speaking, the governor) was awarded a church certificate and silver cross, blessed by the Catholicos-Patriarch, "for his personal contribution to strengthening the Georgian Orthodox Church in the region and on the occasion of the 2000th anniversary of the Nativity of Christ."¹¹ However, in February 2002, the chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Self-Government and Regional Policy announced that the administration of the aforementioned governor "regularly misused public funds allocated by the state for the teaching the Georgian language to the local population, mainly spending them on his administrative staff."¹² By that time, however, Gigla Baramidze had stepped down from his post, and there was no investigation into "misuse of funds."

Recently, the Patriarchate attempted to prevent a British theatre company's tour of Tbilisi. The Patriarchate's statement read that performances based on Shakespeare's sonnets contained homosexual and erotic scenes, and got "controversial reviews" in London."¹³

Meanwhile, new churches and chapels are being built all over Georgia, their funding sources as dubious as their architectural value. On one of the highest hills overlooking Tbilisi, the grandiose Trinity Church is being erected. Who cares that the city is brimming with juvenile and elderly beggars, and that many people cannot afford healthcare? Instead, the legacy of Shevardnadze's and Ilia the Second's era will remain for generations to come...

11 *Prime-News*, Tbilisi, August 1, 2001 (in Georgian).

12 *Prime-News*, Tbilisi, February 26, 2002 (in Georgian).

13 *Prime-News*, Tbilisi, June 13, 2003 (in Georgian).

MORALS AND VALUES

In 2001, the US and UK embassies to Georgia issued a joint statement on religious intolerance and violence in Georgia. On February 5, 2002, the leaders of Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Lutheran and Baptist religious associations wrote an open letter to the Georgian president calling on him to take measures against religious violence. In the summer of 2002, 15 members of the US Congress called on the Georgian president to adopt effective measures to this end. Senator Ben Campbell, Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, said that President Shevardnadze and Georgian authorities turn a blind eye to incessant violence against specific religious communities, and expressed his hope that the congressmen's letter will be perceived as a direct signal of the extreme concern of the United States, which are looking forward to the Georgian authorities taking all necessary measures to protect people regardless of their religious affiliation.

In his biannual reports to the Parliament, the Georgian Ombudsman strives to draw attention to the grievous plight with freedom of religion in the country, but fails to evoke any response. Civil society activists, to the best of their capacities, systematically point out disturbing developments in this sphere. For instance, in December 1999, the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development held a discussion on "Religious Minorities in (Semi)-Democratic Societies." In this paper, I have quoted several times from speeches given by experts at this discussion. However, so far, those are voices in the wilderness.

It is illustrative that no single influential Georgian politician is a church-goer, let alone inclined towards Orthodox fundamentalism. On the one hand, it is difficult to determine how religious each politician is, on the other, it is easy: their deeds and lifestyles speak for themselves. President Shevardnadze, Minister of State Dzhorbenadze, Ajarian Governor Abashidze, labour leader Natelashvili, socialist leader Rheulishvili, major manufacturer Topadze - the list can be continued - all have Communist party and nomenclature backgrounds, varied in length and scope only. It is difficult to find Christian values at the heart of their political activity.

Nor is there any reason to suspect the new opposition leaders of piousness. Most of them grew out of the president's party: Parliament Speaker Burjanadze, National Movement leader Saakashvili, United Democrats' leader Zhvaniya, leaders of the New Right Gamkrelidze and Gachechiladze. A few parties within the national-liberation movement - republicans and traditionalists - have managed to stay afloat; their leaders are not ardent believers either. Yet none of them dares to openly criticize these alarming tendencies, for fear of losing votes. National democrats have

always been special: in the 1980s, they put forward a concept of “theo-democracy” which was both vague and dangerous.

According to Paata Zakareishvili, “There is an apparent unhealthy tendency to speculate with religious values. The time is approaching when the policy of ignoring problems between religious associations in the country will inevitably become an obstacle to democratic change. Unfortunately, Georgian politicians either do not take this problem seriously, or dwell in the state of illusory complacency, due to ignorance, flag-waving patriotic incompetence and misguided self-confidence.”¹⁴

Nugzar Papuashvili, whom I already quoted above, writes that “the major problem is ignorance, or, to put it mildly, insufficient competence of the authorities, the administration and most educators in matters of religion and law.”¹⁵

However, according to Zurab Chiaberashvili, “someone who claims to abide by a set of principles (Orthodox faith), but in fact does not, provides the ideal foothold for people who want to treat the society as a backward illiterate crowd. Such a person is just like a Soviet-time communist, who declared one thing (equality, fraternity and unity) but did quite another (appropriated public funds).”¹⁶

ON SURVEYS

Why did we come to this, and not something else? Doesn’t Georgia have the image of a religiously tolerant country whose history knew neither religious massacres nor religious harassment? Let us have a look at the religious map of present-day Georgia (the data below is approximate, compiled from various sources, and data on the number of atheists is altogether absent).

Chart 1.

no	Religious Affiliation	Numbers	%
1	Armenian Apostolic	200 000	5,0
2	Muslims	400 000	10,0
3	Catholics	50 000	1,25
4	Yazidi	30 000	0,75
5	Jehovah’s Witnesses	15 000	0,375
6	Jews	10 000	0,25

14 Zakareishvili, Paata. “Why Agreement and Not Law?” Nodia, Ghia (ed.), *op.cit.* – Pp.14-21.

15 Discussion. Nodia, Ghia (ed.), *op.cit.* – Pp.44-46.

16 *Ibid.* – Pp.39-42

7	Baptists	6 000	0,15
8	Representatives of Pentecostalism	5 000	0,125
9	Molokans	2 000	0,05
10	Doukhobors	1 500	0,04
11	Salvation Army	800	0,02
12	Lutherans	700	0,02
13	New Apostolic Church	700	0,02
14	Bahá'ís	500	0,0125
15	Seventh-day Adventists	400	0,01
16	Krishnaists	200	0,005
17	Others	200	0,005

Obviously, Georgia, unlike its neighbours in the Caucasus, is a multi-religious country. According to Avto Jakhadze, in such conditions “cooperation and mutual tolerance between religions is a necessary but not sufficient precondition for peaceful co-existence.” Jakhadze also points out, “It often happened that conflicts on political, ethnic or other grounds acquired a religious component over time. It sometimes happened that the original non-religious causes of the conflict became irrelevant but the conflict continued on religious grounds.”¹⁷

Civil society experts are aware of all this, but does the general public understand it? Must not these tendencies be nurtured by someone or something in order to persist?

Below is some interesting data of an opinion poll that may throw light on the situation. The poll covered 1200 respondents countrywide.¹⁸

Chart 2. Trust towards various institutions in Georgia

	Trust	Do not trust	Cannot answer	Refused to answer
Police	51	1006	57	114
President	124	910	89	88

17 Jakhadze, Avto. “The Political Dimension of Religious Diversity in the Caucasus.” Nodia, Ghia (ed.), *op.cit.* – Pp. 22-26.

18 *Your Rights*. Periodical of the Office of the Human Rights Defender of Georgia, #1, 2001 (in Georgian).

Court	116	913	87	95
State Security	82	947	86	96
Parliament	51	982	75	103
Government Administration	44	949	111	107
Oversight Chamber	78	914	114	105
Ombudsman	174	749	187	101
State Tax Service	39	984	84	104
Orthodox Church	767	235	118	91
Ministry of Environment	118	838	148	107
Anti-Corruption Council	80	881	144	106

This data demonstrate that there is, with insignificant variations, a complete lack of trust towards state institutions that are corrupt, incompetent, inefficient and indifferent towards the general public. Against this background, people are looking for a reference point, a moral compass which will guide them to faith and hope in the ruthless reality. If this compass is any good is quite another story. In terms of logic, this does not work very well either, as long as individual members of the clergy very seldom qualify as a moral authority, let alone an intellectual one, whereas as a group, they apparently qualify as both. Indeed, the Lord's ways are past finding out...

One more chart:

Chart 3. Qualities of which parents disapprove in a future son/daughter-in-law

Different religion	306
Low culture	292
Nothing, as long as the person has moral integrity	267
Criminal past	262
Previous sexual contacts	211
Different nationality	180
Previous marriage	166
Physical disability	140
Unemployment	121
Low income	65
Disrespect towards traditions	58

Inferior social status	49
Unattractive appearance	21
No higher education	16
Unacceptable political views	15
Being a refugee	14
Living in a different part of Georgia	10
Other	9
Foreign citizenship	7
Superior social status	7

The data in Chart 3 turned out to be even more unexpected than that in Chart 2, to an extent that no single expert in the field was willing to analyse it in-depth. It seems that this data still needs some reflection.

Now let us look at the data of a survey made a few years back and mentioned by Ghia Nodia in the volume quoted throughout this paper.¹⁹ In 1997, the German Arnold-Bergstrasser-Institute and the Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development conducted a survey in Georgia, in which 65% of the respondents agreed that “faith and religious values should define all aspects of public life.” In international sociological practice, the answer to that particular question is used to measure the extent to which society supports religious fundamentalism. More specifically, it reflects the willingness of society to obliterate the divide between religion and social-political life, fully subordinating the latter to the former. According to this survey, Georgia is ready for religious fundamentalism. Notably, 70% of the respondents who favoured fundamentalism were students, which is not a good sign.

Speaking of students, whereas in 1978, just 1% of the students of Tbilisi State University said they were religious, in 2000, this figure rose to almost 89%.²⁰ Of course, back in 1978, some people did not dare to admit that they were religious, and in 2000, some people did not dare to admit to being atheists, but the trend is obvious.

In order to avoid dramatisation, it should be noted that even if there is a threat of religious fundamentalism in Georgia, Georgian citizens are its only possible target.

19 Nodia, Ghia. “Is There a Threat of Religious Fundamentalism in Georgia?” *Ibid.* – Pp.57-68.

20 Papuashvili, Nugzar. *World Religions in Georgia*. – Tbilisi: Liberty Institute, 2002 (in Georgian).

Georgia has no domestic resources for exporting Orthodox fundamentalism, and no export market. Our neighbours need not worry.

WHY?

Here is how Sozar Subeliani explains the dominant attitudes, “A very significant part of the society considers Orthodox Christianity the “national ideology.” In their eyes, the “national role” of the Orthodox faith rates much higher than the mystical or social functions of the church. Consequently, other religious trends are viewed as a threat to the Georgian state and national unity, which causes the aggressive attitude of the society to non-Orthodox religious trends.”²¹

Zurab Kiknadze believes that “Inter-religious peace in Georgia is inextricably linked to the public mindset. As long as any other religion is perceived as “alien” and thus “hostile,” we shall have no peace... This is Byzantine heritage. Just like in Byzantium, our population is excessively politicized, and religious disagreements are manifestations of this fact. This is Byzantine mentality, which the most perfect law cannot change.”²²

An interesting observation was made by Ghia Nodia, “We can say that there is a gap between the corporate interests of the Church and the national interests. It is in the national interests of Georgia to protect national unity and the unity of the state, which requires strengthening democratic institutions and especially, implementing a policy of religious tolerance... The Orthodox Church views this set of national interests as a threat to its corporate interests.”²³

A similar concern is voiced by Avto Jokhadze, “Throughout the post-soviet space, the evolution of economic and political systems is directed towards the West (in any case, there is an attempt towards Westernization), whereas the revival of Orthodoxy and Islam pushes the society away from Western values. Obviously, society is unable to move in two opposite directions at once. This circumstance exacerbates the already severe contradictions within our transition society, and is extremely dangerous because it is conducive to the ignition of domestic conflicts.”²⁴

21 Subeliani, Sozar. “On Some Causes of Religious Aggression and Conflicts in Georgia.” Nodia, Ghia (ed.), *op.cit.* – Pp. 27-37.

22 Discussion. *Ibid.* – Pp.52-55.

23 Nodia, Ghia. “Is There a Threat of Religious Fundamentalism in Georgia?” *Ibid.* – Pp.57-68.

24 Jokhadze, Avto. “The Political Dimension of Religious Diversity in the Caucasus.” *Ibid.* – Pp.22-26.

* * *

Apparently, the current problems are caused by the current plight of society (more accurately, proto-society). There are few oases in a society, even fewer than in the desert. If policy, governance and education are a mess, things can't be any better with religion or sports.

Georgian citizens today are like the passengers of a departing train who wish to reach different destinations by that same train. There are three ways out of this situation. The train can remain stuck at the station until the passengers start a fight and tear it to pieces. Or else, the train can start moving, but to just one of the two possible destinations. Either we go back to a medieval mentality and corresponding lifestyle, or we move on, towards modern mentality and a lifestyle based on modern pluralistic values.

All this said, I still believe that Georgia will not collapse into fundamentalism. Otherwise, Georgia will stop existing.