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A New Public Role of Religion? Recent Issues of Religion and Politics in Georgia

Ketevan Rcheulishvili, Tbilisi

Abstract:

This essay discusses the discourse on the public role of religion in Georgia after the collapse of the communist regime. Particularly, it examines the Georgian Orthodox Church’s contribution to national identity and new social values and norms. Thus, this essay assesses the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in public opinion building despite the fact that democratic and liberal values to some extent conflict with traditional or/and religious values promoted by the Georgian Orthodox Church.

Orthodox Christianity in the Context of Social Sciences’ Research

The interdisciplinary study of Orthodox Christianity recently became the subject of systematic research; of particular concern is the public and political role of Orthodox Churches. In this respect, the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC)—representing the majority religion in Georgia—is an interesting case. The GOC has traditionally had a significant presence in the public sphere. Thus, since the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the GOC has become a major focus of social science research about political developments in Georgia.

To adequately understand both religious change and the complex development of the church–state relationship in Georgia, we should take into account several methodological aspects and conceptual ambiguities already noted in various sociological studies.

First, although most authors have agreed that there is no single European model of church–state relations, some authors insist on a coherent European dimension of modernity, emphasizing the dichotomy between tradition and modernity. However, this dichotomy speaks

little about the details and actual position of a specific religious tradition in any particular country. Post-communist countries should not be seen as a homogenous case that contradicts Europe because there are many aspects presented in both Western and Eastern European church–state dynamics that should be analyzed through a comparative perspective of church–state relations in Europe.

Second, religion is no longer seen as a dependent variable that is negatively affected by modernization but is perceived as an active factor in social development. Pluralism and individualization do not automatically weaken the social position of religion. These changes in the theoretical perspectives of sociological approaches may affect any historical narrative and methodological approach in this field of study.

Third, the trend of revitalization, which was widely acknowledged and discussed in the latest studies of post-communist countries (and beyond them), does not appear to be unidimensional evidence. A distinction should be made between “the revitalization visible in the public appearance and role of religion [...] and

the revitalization, visible in the rise of individual religiosity according to different indicators (like belonging, church participation, belief in God and particularly behavioural consequences of religious believing).” (Zrinščak 2011, 162) The newly acquired public role of religion has not always developed in parallel with the rise of individual religiosity.

To summarize, the most crucial and perhaps trickiest issue in dealing with our issue is how to adequately analyze the changes in church–state relations over the course of socio-political transition, remaining aware of the changing ‘conceptual narratives’ of modernization.

The Georgian Orthodox Church during the Communist Regime

As Stephen F. Jones remarked in his essay on ‘Soviet Religious Policy and the Georgian Orthodox Apostolic Church’ (1989), the Georgian religion has always been part of the Soviet Union’s ‘national problem’. The Soviet government has treated religion not only as an ‘erroneous ideology’ but as a political institution with an independent social base. In Georgia, the Church was seen as supporting ethnic separation and thereby serving as a barrier to the integration of the Georgian population into the Soviet Union.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet administration strongly restricted organizational activity of the GOC. A combination of atheist propaganda and terror led to the virtual elimination of practicing believers. Soviet laws economically and judicially weakened the church. However, during the Second World War there was some relaxation of the government’s anti-religious measures. To strengthen morale against the advancing German “Wehrmacht” during the Second World War, Stalin allowed religious communities in Georgia to practice their faith. The GOC, together with other Soviet religious organizations, adopted a patriotic attitude and was rewarded with state recognition of its canonical status. In 1943, its autocephaly was recognized by the Russian Orthodox Church, probably on Stalin’s personal instructions.

Under Khrushchev, there was increasing state interference in church affairs. To avoid growth in church influence after World War II, Khrushchev started an anti-religious campaign reminiscent of the atheistic propaganda of the 1920s and ‘30s. At the 20th Congress of the Georgian Communist Party in 1960, the party leader’s First Secretary V. P. Mzhavanadze called for a more intense struggle against ‘survivors of the past’.

In the 1960s and ‘70s, believers began to establish links with nationalist and civil rights movements. Many religious activists became prominent in the growing dissident movement. In Georgia, the link between

civil rights and the rights of Orthodox believers was strong. Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Merab Kostava, Viktor Rtskhiladze and other believers provided the core of the Georgian dissident movement in the 1970s. ‘Official’ churches, despite remaining within the narrow framework of religious activity, were not affected by the clampdown on dissent.

Georgian nationalists, whose influence has grown substantially since the demonstrations of November 1988, and particularly since the massacre on April 9, 1989, regarded the church as playing a vital role in the struggle for national self-expression under the communist dictatorship. Official surveys in the 1980s showed that young people, in particular, sympathized with a close association between the GOC, national and ethnic identity.

This episode marked not only a new era of church–state relations but also a turning point in the relationship between the Orthodox Church and the Georgian public.

Religion and National Identity in the Post-Communist era

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Georgian Orthodoxy has experienced a massive revival in a politically independent Georgia. However, the first years of the post-communist period brought religious freedom that was extended equally to traditional (national) and minority religions and thereby created a space for new religions to enter the previously closed religious field. “However, traditional churches and conservative parties found it unjustified to grant the same privileges to traditional churches (that had suffered during Communism) and to newly arrived religions, [...] some of which possessed ‘suspicious’ features” (Zrinščak 2011, p. 161). The tendency of the selective collaboration of states with traditional religious institutions, eliding the rights of minority religions seems to note the compatibility of religious values of traditional churches with the (nationalistic) politics of new democracies in Eastern Europe. Thus, the public trust and loyalty towards traditional churches that prevailed in these countries can be explained through common acknowledgement of the importance of traditional religious institutions in surviving national identity and their role in national mobilization of societies.

Liberated by new political freedom, the GOC in independent Georgia successfully incorporated a nationalist ideology in its agenda and became a catalyst in the process of nation-building (Sulkhanishvili 2012). In contrast to the inconsistent post-soviet policy of the young state, the Church provided an alternative and nationalistic ideology. Georgian people perceived the GOC as a single neutral territory, where the real national narratives could be established.

The GOC under Patriarch Ilia II has always taken a patriotic position on most issues. In his sermons, Ilia II has always stressed the church's role as a defender of the Georgian nation and its culture. In his 1980 Christmas Epistle, he declared that 'where the language declines, so the nation falls' and in 1986, the church published a booklet entitled *Glory to the Georgian Language* to celebrate Georgian Language Day (April 14). In 1987, during the 150th anniversary celebrations of the great Georgian national poet and public figure, Ilia Chavchavadze, the church canonized him and devoted itself to the religious interpretations of his patriotic writings. Georgian sociologists assess this event as a logical continuation of 19th century nationalism, which re-emerged in the last years of the Soviet Union.

In contrast to Georgian nationalism in the 19th century, which was liberal or civic nationalism in the context of a nation building processes, a considerable part of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the late 20th century moved toward an ethnic nationalism with an anti-western ideology that rejected globalization and liberalism. They expressed their fear of losing traditional ties, which were presumed to be very important for the country.

Current Developments

Some recent studies continue to analyze the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in both politics and identity formation. Interviews with politicians have revealed that a large portion of the Georgian political elite acknowledge the special role of the Orthodox Church in society and support the reinforcement of its status. Therefore, this tendency inadvertently leads to a stronger role of the Church in the public domain (Sulkhanishvili 2012). In this respect, the public role of the Church is still ambivalent due to the European-style democratic system of the country, which contradicts this type of religious identity and power.

However, other researchers have formulated new fields of research and tried to evaluate the Church's contribution to civil society (CIPDD 2010). This development may be associated with the more general tendency of imbalance between the formal and informal dimensions of democratic consolidation becoming increasingly noticeable within Georgia. Since 1989, Georgia has seen much effort aimed at reforming and refining the formal and institutional side of democracy, such as establishing institutional structures, amending legislation, reforming bureaucracies, and privatizing and developing economies towards free-market systems. Compared with the considerable progress made in these respects, the informal side of democracy, such as the emergence of a proper political culture as well as the generation of legitimacy, establishing civic and community initia-

tives, etc. have received much less attention and appear to remain vulnerable.

An assessment of Georgian civil society indicates that the highest level of citizen engagement is in the frame of the Orthodox Church. Thus, the Georgian Orthodox Church is one of the most influential institutions in the country also regarding civil society. It is noteworthy that this form of religious engagement has increased sharply over recent years, from 1.3% to 5.6%. Particularly, it is much higher than civic participation in other spheres, e.g., consumer protection unions, where it stands at 0.1% (WVS 2009; CIPDD 2010, 24).

After independence, the public space and public life were very different from Communist traditions. The Georgian Orthodox Church, having a weak institutional background and capacities and a lack of institutional experience due to the 70 years of religious persecution under the Soviet regime, had difficulties finding its new position within the complex normative discourse in Georgia. Therefore, forms of religious relations, religious conventions, religious practice and other features had to be adjusted to the new established public space. Relations and forms of communication between believers and the Georgian Orthodox clergy were rather informal, flexible and less institutionalized. It is noteworthy that informal relations and informal norms of reciprocity have had more influence in Georgia than the formal rule of law. While the official structures have always been treated with a fair dose of mistrust in Georgia, personal relationships and family often carry more importance than loyalty to the central state.

Nevertheless, the new civic values of participation and active civil society provide an environment where the GOC can operate successfully despite propagating anti-modern norms and values. Giving attention to these processes, public debates and research may overcome the dichotomy between a highly critical view of the GOC and a euphemistic, idealized view.

Conclusion

Public discussions on the public role of religion still exhibit strong polarization between representatives of the Georgian Orthodox Church and most of the intellectuals in the country. The Church's image among these intellectuals is that of an anti-modern institution set against the forces of modernization and Europeanization. Consequently, they strongly criticize the role of the Orthodox Church in public opinion building and claim that religion should be excluded from civil society. The result is polarization of the discourse between anti-church polemics and pro-church dithyrambs.

In light of this, there is a clearly defined necessity for a balanced treatment of these issues in both research and

the broader public debate. A deeper analysis of religious civic participation might be an opportunity for investi-

gations that are neither secularly biased nor apologetic in favor of the Church.

About the Author

Ketevan Rcheulishvili is currently a PhD student in Sociology at the University of Kassel (Germany) and affiliated with the Russian State University of the Humanities, EU-FP7 Project ISSICEU. Her research interests are the sociology of religion, concepts of social capital, methods of qualitative research and interpretative approaches.

Further Reading

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Church as Civil Society? Recent Issues of Religion and Politics in Armenia

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Abstract:

The Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) has experienced a revival in Armenia after the country's independence from the Soviet Union. In contrast, Armenia's post-Soviet civil society has remained weak. By definition, the church itself is part of civil society: it can represent the interests of people and promote civic participation. This article reflects whether the AAC has utilized her potential in civil society to assist Armenia's democratization. In particular, the article indicates how the AAC's strong ties with the state have so far prevented her from becoming a full-fledged member of civil society. It also identifies those spheres of activity where the AAC has nonetheless contributed to the formation of civil society in Armenia.

Church as Civil Society

A religious institution like a church can contribute to civil society in a number of ways. For one thing, a church can represent. It can make an effort to defend the rights of people in the face of the government and to counterbalance the latter's authority. A church can engage local communities and church-related organizations in various participatory activities, such as volunteering or charity. Church-related communities and organizations can become potential venues for their members to practice democracy. Finally, a church is capable of contributing to civil society through its ideology. It can theologize the concept of civil society and propagate values

such as mutual trust, participation, self-sacrifice, and volunteering, as desirable aspects of religious identity.

A brief review of the social activity and political role of the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC) during Armenia's move toward independence will show how the AAC has used her potential to contribute to civil society.

Revival of the AAC in Armenia

The AAC was among those institutions in Armenia who undeniably benefited from the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Armenian Church experienced colossal hardships during Communist rule. Over the course of the 1920s and 1930s, the properties of the Mother Sea