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Georgian Orthodox Church and Political Project of Modernization

Introduction

Upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Georgian Orthodox Church was simultaneously exposed to both modernization and social conservatism. The Church became a refuge for conservative ideology, sending clear messages of de-modernization reminiscent of church-state relations during the Russian Empire. Many other post-Communist countries were in a similar situation[1].

Increased social role of the Church in post-Soviet Georgia can be explained via the concept of *ideological vacuum*[2], which is also helpful for understanding religion in Eastern Europe[3]. It suggests that dissolution of the Soviet Union created a problem of self-definition along with other socio-political challenges. If before it was possible to discuss Georgian identity and nationalism in Marxist-Leninist terms, at least formally, discreditation of the latter created the need of a new Georgian national ideology imbued with religious ethos.

The concept of *ideological vacuum*, similar to religious market theory, implies that our ideological needs, whether political or transcendental, are in a constant flux. If combined with *religious market hypothesis*, the theory could suggest that individual choices in favor of certain religions are determined by the level of competition between institutions and organizations professing the given ideology.

In Georgia, choice was made between two elements of national identity—religion and ethnicity. Whether Georgia had the option to prioritize civic nationalism is a subject of debate since situation was similar in the whole region, where religion and ethnicity became new dominant elements of identity. Failure of civic nationalism, further aggravated by cynical disposition towards the state, can account for the lack of competition between state institutions on the ideological market. Social cynicism originated from the Soviet times—the great majority of Georgians are accustomed to viewing politics as dirty and fake. In practice, this attitude was revealed in refusal to cooperate with law-enforcement agencies and choosing criminals as mediators instead.

After the declaration of independence, political parties with radical nationalist rhetoric soon managed to discredit themselves due to civil and ethnic confrontations, and their inability to establish an effective political

system. As a result, the Georgian Orthodox Church emerged as an actor on Georgian ideological market. Trust in the Church compensated for the lack of trust in state institutions.

From a secondary institution, the Georgian Orthodox Church soon turned into a spiritual and cultural leader of the nation, and without damaging Universalist nature of religion, continues to have a strong, but unproportional, relationship with ethnicity. According to the Church, being an Orthodox Christian does not translate into being a Georgian, but being a Georgian equals to being an Orthodox Christian. Along with preserving religious Universalism, which is a central trait of monotheistic faiths, this doctrine of Georgian nationalist identity is based on *religious culture hypothesis*, which suggests that dominant religious faith in any nation leaves a deep mark on culture and society. Accordingly, as demonstrated by the position of clergy, a socialized human in Georgian cultural setting, even an atheist, is still an Orthodox Christian to some extent.

Starting from the 1990's the Georgian Orthodox Church was the only organization that could ideologically unify the society and provide services. However, its intolerance towards modernization, the West, sects and sexual minorities remains a hindrance in the formation of a liberal civil society in Georgia[4]. Stronger state institutions and increased public trust in their efficiency, which became possible only after 15 years of independence, generated a new civil discourse of the political elite alongside with traditional ethnic-nationalist discourse of the Church. Despite significant legislative changes, the Georgian Orthodox Church preserved its monopoly over public opinion, which would have been impossible without state support.

Religion in Liberal Democracy

Theoretical framework for analyzing social outcomes of the Church's teachings needs to originate from academic discussions on the compatibility of religion and liberal democracy. This discourse acquires an especially pragmatic value when secularization theory, discussed in parallel with modernization, loses its credence owing to increased socio-political function of religion around the world. It could even be argued that the world is more religious today than it has ever been[5]. For traditional countries like Georgia, dynamics between religion and political ideology are more important than for countries with a stable, consolidated political system. Traditional countries need to balance different social forces, which is an individual process for each society and cannot be learned from one model.

Jaspers provides four major characteristics of modernity: contemporary science and technology, strive for independence, globalization and most importantly, emergence of mass movements (nationalism, democracy, socialism, social movements)[6]. A modern state can be characterized by high level of civil involvement in politics. It is a political system where state institutions mediate between social forces (religious, ethnic, class) and regulate them with general political rules[7]. Acquisition of individual rights and the right to participate in politics is an important instrument for any social group since it provides the means to effectively partake in generation and utilization of social resources[8].

In every society there are groups with limited participation. In liberal-democratic countries, such groups include children, prisoners and illegal immigrants. However, if we look at the history of western European liberal-democratic countries and the USA, the number of groups with limited rights of participation is much higher. It was not long ago when different religious, ethnic, and race groups, low social classes, sexual minorities and women were allowed limited political participation. Modernization of a political system implies socio-political activity and, more generally speaking, intensive social involvement in utilization of social resources.

There is a modern tendency of diminishing religious motives and weakened church influence[9]. Scholars studying modernization refer to this process as secularization. One of the central hypotheses of this theory is a shift in basic ethical values as a result of political, social and economic changes, which in turn precipitates sacralization of the profane or institutionalization of the sacral[10]. Exchange of attributes between religious and national ideas is the most prominent transformation. If previously government was legitimized by God, nation became the primary source of legitimization and the main sovereign in modernity[11]. If people defended their faith in the holy wars of the past, now nation, which is also immortal and eternal, became the reason of self-sacrifice. Modernity discovered secular equivalents of traditional sacred values[12].

If we discuss religion from the perspective of political participation, we could argue that secularization specific to Western modernity, is one of the preconditions for increased political participation. Politically influential Universalist religion sets certain ideological restrictions on the political participation of its lower class parish, as well as women. Moreover, representatives of other faiths are perceived as deficient members of the state since due to their religious affiliation they are not equal before the law. In consequence of vanishing religious influence and privatization of religious experience through the process of secularization, important socio-political issues are subjected to

rational rather than theological analysis, which favors social consensus and pluralism based on its pragmatic-utilitarian-liberal[13].

Freedom of faith is one of the fundamental values of liberal democracy since the burden of judgment makes consensus between individuals in transcendental and metaphysical questions impossible. Subsequently, there is a vital intrinsic link between pluralization and liberal democracy, since the latter is a type of state where citizens have the right to chose their religious, moral and metaphysical convictions[14]. If religious pluralism has a positive impact on the level of religiosity, as proved by *religious market theory*, it certainly becomes a threat to a monopolist church.

Modernization as a new core civilization has a diverse impact on religion. Yves Lambert categorizes modernity's influence on religion into four types: fall, adaptation and reinterpretation, conservative reaction, and innovation[15]. From these four, only the first is directly linked with secularization; adaptation-reinterpretation and innovation are only related to it if they imply severance from conservative religious authorities; conservative reaction works against secularization since it entails fortification of religion and religious authority at the expense of pluralism and tolerance[16].

Religiosity does not pose a threat to liberal culture when religious organizations are part of a pluralist society, as in the United States. Religious dynamics of the United States are most convincingly explained by *religious market theory*, which links high level of religiosity to pluralism and strong competition between religious organizations[17]. There have been academic attempts in political philosophy to unite liberalism and religion in order to prove that a person with religious values can have liberal opinions and be politically active without prohibiting the same for others[18].

However, due to the nature and extent of religiosity in Georgia, it is impossible to start a conversation on the cohabitation of religion and liberalism. Georgian religious domain is monopolized by one church, which perceives this monopoly as a precondition and indicator of its own strength. Religious pluralism represents a threat not only for the Orthodox Church, but also for the society whose values and culture are sheltered by the Church. Monopolist religious organizations in post-Soviet dominion act according to *religious market theory*[19], which implies posing legislative obstacles to rival religious organizations via governmental assistance, and creating privileges for themselves. Public support for these laws is founded on the claim that sectarian, non-Georgian teachings are detrimental to the country's culture, and accordingly, political freedom. It is paradoxical that apart from the 1920's and 1930's, Soviet government appealed to similar politics in order to secure the monopoly of scientific atheism.

Religious Dynamics of Post–Soviet Georgia

Soviet modernization project was aimed at complete eradication, rather than weakening, of the role of religion. During certain periods, war on religion was implemented through forceful means—churches were closed and demolished, priesthood repressed, anti-religious magazines and newspapers were published. Religious "prejudices" had to be replaced by a truthful and materialistic vision of the universe advocated by scientific atheism, which incorporated belief in Marxist-Leninist interpretation of history[20]. Nevertheless, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union, almost every post-Soviet country established the same religious monopoly as before[21].

In independent Georgia, political parties with radical nationalist rhetoric soon discredited themselves owing to civil and ethnic confrontations and their incapacity to establish an effective political system. As characteristic to many post-Soviet countries, Georgian nation was consolidated around the Church[22]. Orthodox Christianity became an invaluable element of national identity and an ethnic delineator. There is an asymmetrical relationship between Georgian ethnicity and Orthodox Christianity: being an Orthodox Christian does make one a Georgian, but being a Georgian implies being an Orthodox Christian.

Due to high-level of mistrust in governmental institutions and cynical attitude to public domain, no organization professing national idea proved competitive during the early stages of independence. Tolerated for 70 years, the Church did not possess any experience in tolerance. After gaining monopoly over religious domain and acquiring major social functions, it turned into an obstacle for modernization.

Georgians associate modernization with high-quality life of Western societies, stable political and economic systems, and effective state institutions. In addition to institutional modernization, ideological changes are also considered. Since Soviet totalitarian-atheistic yoke was opposed due to its detrimental effect on Georgian soul and independence, Georgian soul needs to be defined in Tocquevillian liberal terminology. Yet the Church emerged as the primary advocate of anti-Western sentiments in society; paradoxically, it is one of the institutions that incurred greatest losses during the Soviet totalitarian regime.

Complex challenges of the modernization project aimed at the integration into Western structures can be divided in two parts. First is the Church's attitude towards certain groups and organizations, limiting their socio-political activities. Disposition of the Church towards sects and sectarians, women and sexual minorities, and non-Orthodox Georgians presents these groups

as deficient members of society to those who value the Church's teachings. The second problem is an alternative project of modernization derived from the Georgian Orthodox Church. One significant illustration of this project is the idea of monarchy so popular among priesthood. The conviction that modernization is possible through preserving Georgian traditions cultivated by the Church is principally correct, but often aimed at thwarting, rather than guiding, the process.

Alternative project of modernization proposed by the Church falls into the theoretical framework of multiple modernities. Modernity here is perceived as a new core civilization, with the West as the initiator of structural differentiation of social fields in numerous societies. These processes, however, were implemented in multiple contexts, giving birth to different institutional and ideological models of modernization. The models are modern, but simultaneously influenced by traditional cultures. Depending on their cultural-ideological traits, cultures favor different approaches when solving problems associated with modernity. This generates an illusion of confrontation with modernity. In some circumstances, certain socio-intellectual movements might present themselves as "post-modern" or "anti-globalist", and religious organizations can proclaim themselves as fundamentalist in order to deal with modernity-related issues. This, however, does not mean that they have transgressed the boundaries of modernity[23].

The government-led modernization project in Georgia proposes close ties with the West, integration into NATO and EU structures, and participation in global politico-cultural and economic affairs as a solution to the country's problems. This is a classical Western project of modernization, which suggests that Western cultural program of modernity and its major administrative institutions will eventually spread throughout the modern world. The Georgian Orthodox Church, on the other hand, presents Western "soulless" humanistic culture as the main menace for Georgia.

Both, the Church and the state, emphasize the same problem, which can be defined as the national ideology program. Its foremost goal is politico-cultural sovereignty. However, the Church considers Western-style institutional development proposed by the state as the primary source of trouble. Nevertheless, the Church also highlights national-modern ideology as a central problem.

The political project of Georgian modernization is aimed at the preservation of plurality of social groups, ideologies and lifestyles, which is possible through human rights and supremacy of the law. For the religious project of modernization, on the other hand, social pluralism represents a challenge for the "true" order. Instead, maximum homogenization is advocated, which can

only be accomplished through the subordination of different groups. This system of subordination is controlled by a Georgian Orthodox male — women have to submit to his orders, non-Orthodox Christians will not achieve salvation, and sexual minorities do not possess any rights. As Father Elizbar (Kashueti Church) noted, *"Georgian gays do not exist"*, and thus, they need to be assigned a separate territory.

Georgianness and Orthodox Christianity

As noted before, the Georgian Orthodox Church subordinates Georgian nationality to Orthodox Christianity. The majority of priesthood defines Georgian nationality in terms of Orthodox Christianity. The latter has so deeply infiltrated Georgian culture that a socialized individual, even a representative of other religions, still thinks in terms of Orthodox Christian categories. Distinguished Georgians who were not Orthodox Christians are deemed worthy only thanks this perspective.

Only one priest drew a line between Georgian nationality and Orthodox Christianity. According to his argument: *"Christ does not distinguish between ethnicities and nations. In the Church of Christ there are no ethnic differences, because Christ does not differentiate between those who recognize and believe in his truth"* (Archpriest Basil, Batumi)[24]. In contrast to this, there are radical arguments supporting the union of nationalism and theology, which equate Georgian nationality with Orthodox Christianity because: *"creation of ethnicities was God's will. Thus, whatever relationship exists between Georgian nation and Orthodox Christianity — is also present between other nations and Orthodox Christianity. In my opinion, being a human should mean being an Orthodox Christian and I believe that Orthodox Christianity is the only true religion and the sole service of God"* (Archpriest Mirian, Lanchkhuti)[25].

Consequently, Georgian nationality and Georgian citizenship entails loyalty to Orthodox culture, which prevents not only religious pluralism, but also cultural rights. Amalgamation of religion and culture, with the implication that the former gave rise to the latter, generates overall intolerance. Examples include: hostility towards ideologically liberal non-governmental organizations and funds financed by the West — Soros Foundation and Freedom Institute being the most oppressed institutions; offended religious feelings after the publication of Georgian translation of *Da Vinci Code* and *Saidumlo Siroba*; the raid of a Halloween party and the turmoil associated with Tbilisi gay parade.

Promotion of Monarchy

Wide support for monarchy by Georgian priesthood is challenging to analyze since such political change is planned for the future due to the lack of public readiness. Moreover, it is clear that the clergy has only a vague idea about the nature of monarchy in Georgia, distribution of responsibilities between state institutions and the role of the Church. As a result, practical reasons for this position should be discussed in a speculative mode.

Potential practical motivations could be that: a) the first two presidents of independent Georgia revealed their powerlessness, precipitating skeptical attitude towards the presidential post among the opposition; b) stronger state during the leadership of the third president limited ideological monopoly of the Church, and reinforced anti-presidential feelings among the opposition. New alternatives to presidential leadership were revealed: 1) parliamentary government — proposed by the Georgian Republican Party; and 2) parliamentary monarchy — recommended by the New Rights. As suggested by the study, the latter is also favored by clergy, probably due to its capacity to augment the Church's position.

Theoretical arguments in favor of monarchy proposed by priesthood can be divided in two groups: first is the psychological profile of a powerful human and a sovereign, which best corresponds to the image of a king; second, and more important for us, is a rhetorical argument: *"… king is twice anointed, and as a priest, I naturally favor a monarch"* (Archpriest M., Lanchkhuti)[26]. Similarly, the function of the Georgian Orthodox Church is explained with reference to the Byzantine Empire. It is obvious that from a political perspective, the priesthood finds it easier to justify its loyalty towards a God-appointed ruler than a public-elected representative.

Religious Monopoly

The priesthood deems the state culpable for restricted the Church's monopoly, a position evident in their reactions to granting the status of judicial entity to religious organizations: *"we were exposed to this and it was a very bad thing"* (Archpriest Mirian, Lanchkhuti)[27]; *"there is an agreement between the state and the Church — a Concordat — and it needs to be guarded; if we are building a state and if we require precision from the Church, the same should be required from the state. There was a clear violation of the Concordat by the state since it happened without any regard for the Church"* (Archpriest Basil, Batumi)[28].

The priesthood has a fairly vague knowledge of the dangers associated with this law: *"naturally, there will probably be increased risks, I don't know"* (Archpriest Benjamin, Kvareli); *"now they will start complaining: Armenians, Catholics, and many others. They will demand things, let's say churches, or other things"* (Archimandrite Grigol, Ude). Archpriest Andria substantiates his position with specific examples and provides two main reasons: *"I don't perceive it as dangerous; the only problem is the relationship with Armenians. Last week, before it was introduced (legislation granting the status of judicial entity to religious organizations — author's note) Armenians did not take our side over the issue of Abkhazia in the UN. When discussing rights, it needs to be considered, that all these faiths have their care-takers abroad. This care-taker is money, and more freedom to act"*[29].

Conclusions

Modernization process in the West continues to generate movements demanding full involvement in social life. The goal of these groups is to become rightful subjects under the law and human rights, and to annihilate negative stereotypes associated with them. Subsequently, social movements are aimed not only towards the political acknowledgement of their rights, but also an increased sense of value in the eyes of other social groups. The disposition of the majority largely determines not only the level of political participation, but also self-evaluation of these groups[30].

In post-Soviet Georgia, ethnically determined conflicts that could potentially engender social movements in a liberal-political environment, developed into full-blown wars and ethnic cleansing in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Instead of liberal ideology, the majority of existent social movements and unions are founded on Christian-Conservative ideals. Rather than offering rights to certain groups, they intend to preserve current limitations.

The priesthood regards tolerance as an intrinsic trait of Georgian culture, ensuring the co-existence of numerous groups throughout history: *"well, we are not even talking about the U.S.; we all know its history. However … when people were burnt at stakes during the ferocious inquisition of twelfth century Europe, capital punishment was abolished in Georgia. Which values are we talking about, then?! Which values can the Europeans teach us?! There is something good that we could learn from them, but I think that they should learn more from us"* (Archpriest Mirian, Lanchkhuti)[31]. *"… We were always tolerant, and during each period of Georgian history there were other ethnicities that lived peacefully with us, and no one would even consider stripping the Orthodox Church of its sta-*

tus as state religion" (Archpriest Benjamin, Kvareli). It is not worth mentioning that tolerance does not correspond to liberal democracy. It resembles the Russian imperial policy towards religious minorities, which granted freedom of religion to every individual, as long as they remained loyal to the emperor[32].

As noted above, the Georgian Orthodox Church aggravates conflicts between social groups. Similar conflicts are characteristic to other societies and to some extent they are always determined by deficient distribution of social resources. Distribution of resources becomes an issue due to their limited nature and an inclination to restrict resources and rights of other groups[33]. The paradox of this restriction policy is the fact that more social groups involved in active social life allow accumulation of more resources.

Notes:

1. See Froese, P. (2004). "After Atheism: An Analysis of Religious Monopolies in the Post-Communist World". Sociology of Religion, 57-75.
2. See Khutsishvili, K. (2004). *The Change of Religious Situation and Security problems in Georgia*. Tbilisi: The Georgian National Academy of Sciences, Iv.Javakhishvili Institute of History and Ethnology.
3. See Tomka, M. (2011). *Expanding Religion. Religious Revival in Post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe*. Berlin/New Yori: Gruyter.
4. Zedania, Giga. "The Rise of Religious Nationalism in Georgia". *Identity Studies*, Ilia State University, Vol. 3, 2011, pp.120-128.
5. See Berger, P. (1997, October 29). "Epistemological Modesty: An Interview with Peter Berger". *The Christian Century*, 972-978; Stark, R. (1999). "Secularization, R.I.P." *Sociology of Religion*, 249-273.
6. Jaspers, K. (1953). *The Origin and Goal of History*. Massachusetts: Yale Univesity Press. 38.
7. See Huntington, P. S. (1973). *Political Order in Changing Societies*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
8. See Weithman, P. J. (2002). *Religion and the Obligations of Citizenship*. Edinburg: Cambridge University Press. 22-24.
9. See McMahon, T. F. (2003). "Secularism". In *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (Vol. XII, pp. 863-866). Gale.
10. Tevzadze, Gigi. „Secularization and the Birth of a Nation". *Identity Studies*. Ilia State University. Vol 2, 2010, p.59.

11. See McIntosh, D. (1970, October). "Weber and Freud: On the Nature and Sources of Authority". *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 35, No. 5. 908-910.

12. See Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined Communities: Refllections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso. 11.

13. See Casanova, J. (1994). *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 40.

14. See Eberle, C. J. (2004). *Religious Conviction in Liberal Politics*. Edinburg: Cambridge University Press. 27-28.

15. See Lambert, Y. (1999). "Religion in Modernity as a New Axial Age: Secularization or New Religious Forms?" *Sociology of Religion*, 303.

16. *Ibid.*, 325.

17. Finke, R., & Iannaccone, L. R. (1993). "Supply-Side Explanations for Religious Change". *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 27-39; Finke, R., & Stark, R. (1992). *The churching of America — 1776-1990: Winners and losers in our religious economy*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

18. Eberle, C. J. (2004). *Religious Conviction in Liberal Politics*. Edinburg: Cambridge University Press; Weithman, P. J. (2002). *Religion and the Obligations of Citizenship*. Edinburg: Cambridge University Press.

19. Froese, P. (2004, Marth). "Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia: Why an Atheistic Monopoly Failed". *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 43, No. 1, 35-50.

20. See Froese, P. (2004). "After Atheism: An Analysis of Religious Monopolies in the Post-Communist World". *Sociology of Religion*, 66.

21. See Froese, P. (a 2004), *Op. Cit.*, 69.

22. See Froese, P. (b2004), *Op. Cit.*, 71.

23. See Eisenstadt, S. (1999). "Multiple Modernities in an Age of Globalization". *The Canadian Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 24, No.2, 283-295.

24. Kekelia, T., et al. (2013). *The Role of Orthodox Chruch in Formation of Georgian National Identity (the end of the XX century — the begining of the XXI century)*. Tbilisi: Ilia State University. 263.

25. *Ibid.*, 248.

26. *Ibid.*, 254.

27. *Ibid.*, 253.

28. *Ibid.*, 268-9.

29. *Ibid.*, 299.

30. See Weithman, *op. cit.* p. 24.

31. Kekelia, K. *et. al. op. cit.* p. 250.

32. See *Gosudarstvennyy stroy Rossiŭskoy Imperii*. (1912). S.-Peterburg`.

33. Weithman*, Op. cit.*, 25.