THE DEPRIVATIZATION OF RELIGION IN MODERN GEORGIA

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Abstract— This paper is part of a broader study "The Shock of Publicity – Conflicting Public and Private Spheres in Georgian Society". Georgia is going through the painful process of transiting from totalitarian to democratic regimes. The study aims to analyze the role that the Georgian Orthodox Church plays in this process, namely, whether the deprivatization of religion – i.e. the presence of religion and its voice in the public sphere can be helpful to democracy. Basing our results on various types of data – researches, in-depth interviews and press analysis, we claim that the deprivatization of religion ongoing in Georgia has no implications to the process of democratization. This study will contribute to the understanding of the experiences of transitory countries, in terms of studying the ground that democracy faces in young democracies.

Index Terms— Deprivatization of Religion, modernity, democratization.

I. INTRODUCTION

Georgia as a post-Soviet country underwent a long period of official atheism. As people were afraid of showing publicly their religious beliefs, religion during the Soviet era was in a certain sense "invisible" or privatized, if it existed at all. Although Stalin allowed the reopening of Churches during the World War II, the Churches became an additional mechanism of state control, whereas religious life on the atheist background was still faint. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Georgia, similarly to many other countries in the world, saw the revival of religion. However, the Georgian case differs from other cases by the fact that religion is important in everyday life for the youngest and most urban groups [1].

Importance of religion in daily life (by settlement type)

(%)	Not at all or Not very important	Rather or Very important
Capital	8	91
Urban	5	94
Rural	11	88

Importance of religion in daily life (by age)

(%)	Rather important	Very important
18-35	46	45
36-55	48	43
56+	54	36

Since the 1990-ies, the Georgian Orthodox Church (hereafter the GOC) acquired an unprecedented influence and authority – it was the only institution that survived stainless to the downfall of the Soviet Union, and thus it represented the only bridge for the society to link itself with Georgian national identity. In a country whose 82% of population considers itself as Orthodox Christian, the Patriarch became an unconditioned authority, whereas trust towards the GOC amounts to 84% [1]. This gave the GOC the possibility to actively get involved in the country's public life – in politics, culture or science.

II. THE CONDITIONING FACTORS OF THE INTERVENTION OF RELIGION IN THE MODERN PUBLIC SPHERE

The intervention of the GOC in the modern Georgian public sphere could be explained by the strong link existing between the GOC and the Georgian national identity. As Casanova posited, "Only those religions which either by doctrine or by cultural tradition have a public, communal identity will want to assume public roles and resist the pressure to become solely or even primarily 'invisible' religions of individual salvation [2]." In the Georgian context, not only is Orthodoxy strongly linked with national identity, but it is also viewed as an inseparable part of it [3]. Moreover, religious nationalism is the only strong rival to civic identity in Georgia [4].

Actually, the GOC can effectively fulfill a public role due to its ability to maintain a dynamic and vital profile as a religion of salvation. The majority of the Georgian clerics interviewed in 2011 think that it is not enough for a person to do goodness in life disinterestedly, nor to be moral and virtuous in order to deserve salvation: choosing the "only true" religion is a necessary must for this. In general, the Georgian messianistic and particularistic ideas are based on several myths: 1) Georgia is St. Mary's share country; 2) Georgia is Our Savior's share country too, as His shirt is kept in there; 3) Georgia is Heaven on earth, and its future will be "brightened" – the idea of which is partly religious, partly political [3].

III. THE CHARACTER OF THE DEPRIVATIZATION OF RELIGION

The fact that the GOC posits its opinion on different issues publicly and sometimes even causes public discussion is already a sign that religion is deprivatized in Georgia. According to Casanova, deprivatization is not necessarily an anti-modern

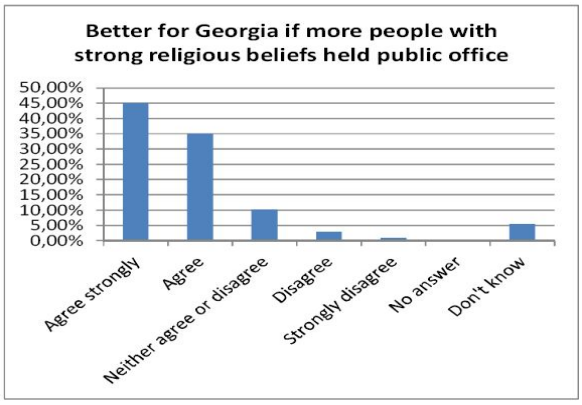
tendency; moreover, it can assume certain forms which would be even desirable from the modern perspective. This happens when the so-called public religions do not endanger individual rights or the modern differentiated structures. In such cases, religions assume new modern forms as they have internalized the principal values of modernity and have acknowledged both – the individual rights and the differentiated structures. This is the case of the Catholic Church, which has adapted itself to modernity and started to think globally. Whenever such "public religions" appear in the public sphere to share their opinion, they represent the position of one modern institution (among others), so they have a place in the modern democratic public sphere. It should be noted that Casanova gives importance to the comprehension of the Enlightenment critique of religion: only those religions that have internalized the main aspects of the critique can fulfill a positive role in the practical rationalization of society and the advance of democracy. In spite of the risks of traditionalistic and fundamentalist projects, the deprivatization of religion is still desirable as this is the only way through which religions can face modernity and possibly adapt to it [5].

Georgia can be placed among the cases that fit in the first form of deprivatization described by Casanova, i.e. those cases when religion is mobilized in defense of "traditional lifeworld" [6]. However, claiming that the deprivatization of religion in Georgia contributes to the processes of rationalization and democratization would be wrong – or, in the best case, premature. The interference of religion in the public sphere does not occur without violating modern differentiated structures and human rights. Moreover, not only is the GOC far from internalizing modern values, but it has not considered the Enlightenment critique of religion either. Let us look in each of these aspects consecutively.

IV. THE STRUCTURAL DIFFERENTIATION OF SPHERES

When it comes to the splitting of sacred and secular realms, we should start by highlighting the questionable ideological neutrality of the state of Georgia: the state favors the GOC legally by the means of the constitutional agreement signed between them in 2002. This document acknowledges the special role that the GOC has played in the history of Georgia, gives it certain economic privileges, and allows it to participate in political decision-making process [7].

Let us set aside juridical facts and look at the data quantitative surveys provide. It is strikingly obvious that the boundary between sacred and secular is vague in people's views too. For instance, in 2008, the World Values Survey measured how much respondents agreed to the following statements: 1) "Politicians who do not believe in God are unfit for public office" – to which about 78% agreed; 2) "It would be better for Georgia if more people with strong religious beliefs held public office" – about 80% agreed [8].



As regards concrete facts of violating the differentiation principle, we shall outline a few among many:

1) On 8 April 2005 the Parliament of Georgia adopted a law on general education, the 18th article of which concerns freedom of conscience and states that the exhibition of religious symbols within public schools should not serve non-academic purposes [9]. However, observation of public schools draws a different picture: in spite of the law, there are icons and even prayer corners in various state schools in Georgia [3].

2) Apart from the spheres of politics and education, the GOC is actively involved in art and culture too. It has publicly shared its negative opinion on various spectacles, books (whether Georgian or foreign), movies and TV shows, with actual implications in some cases. A fruitful example would be a public TV show called "The Great Ten", which was broadcasted in 2008-2009. Prof. Giga Zedania highlighted this fact in 2011: "The aim of the show was to select, with the active participation of the audience, ten 'great Georgians' from history and to rank them according to their popularity. The show quickly became very popular, but two months after its start the Georgian Orthodox Church declared that its format was unbecoming. … Only the active resistance of liberal circles saved the TV show from being discontinued altogether. But still a fundamental change was made to its format: Ten 'great Georgians' were selected in the end, but without ranking them against each other, that is, without defining the place of a particular person on this 'top ten' list [10]."

V. HUMAN RIGHTS

It is presumable that the basic principles of human rights are being violated by the GOC in many regards: equality in human dignity, gender equality, privacy

rights, freedom of opinion and expression, etc. but we state that the GOC is particularly disrespectful to the freedom of thought, conscience and religion. In this regard, the GOC acts with a certain ease as it justifies itself by claiming that it is the sole guardian of national and spiritual values. Already in 1999-2003 the GOC was suspected in organized crime against non-Orthodox parish, and the state did nothing to stop the violence. Moreover, the GOC demanded that religious organizations be divided into three categories in the Law, where it would be the sole member of the first privileged category. The second category should have been composed of "other traditional religions" such as Catholicism, Judaism, Islam and the Gregorian Church – each of them enjoying the right of existence, whereas the third category – which would regroup all the other faiths, - would "profit, in the best case, from severe control, if not total prohibition [22]."

On the threshold of the 21st century, religious aggression was mainly driven towards Jehovah's Witnesses, "sects" in general, and other religions too. The Georgian Patriarch Ilia II assesses "the mass intrusion of foreign religions" as a "great concern", and affirms that "the government should take decisive measures in order to avoid this very dangerous and real threat for Georgia [11]."

Religious organizations (such as the "Orthodox Parents' Union" or the "Public Orthodox Movement") are always on the guard in order to protect Georgian society not only from the influence of other religions, but from "non-traditional" holidays as well. For instance, on 31 October 2008, together with some priests, they sacked a Halloween party organized by a group of young people: they broke the apparatus and physically attacked the participants. The police have not suppressed the violence from the priests [12].

On 17 May 2013, the international day against homophobia, Orthodox priests, organizations and parish attacked a peaceful meeting in Tbilisi, whereas the Patriarchate declared May 17 as the family purity day [13].

On 1 October 2016, the "Orthodox Parents' Union" and some clerics held an action protesting against the arrival and mess of the Roman Pope in Tbilisi, calling him "Anti-Christ" and the Vatican – an "aggressor"[14]. This happened regardless of the official announcement of the Patriarchate that the Pope is welcome to Georgia, the Patriarchate dissociates itself from such aggressive messages, but it also notes that the Pope's mess will be conducted for Catholic Christians [15].

VI. THE RELIGIOUS CRITIQUE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

The Enlightenment epoch in Georgia started in the 60ies of the 19th century. The movement was leaded by a pro-European elite group of young people, the most popular figure of which is represented by Ilia Chavchavadze. However, the ideas and views of the Georgian Enlighteners on Georgia's future remain mostly unaccomplished [4].

Moreover, the GOC tries to appropriate the Enlighteners' cultural heritage, and reinterpret it so as to fit it within its realm. For this purpose, first of all, it canonized Ilia Chavchavadze in 1987, and then continued to spread its views in the public sphere. "Language, Fatherland, Faith" - the famous slogan by Ilia Chavchavadze, which was supposed to serve desacralization and modernization purposes, was given a religious color: in 1999, a cleric explains in an interview for one of the most popular newspapers in Georgia, that true patriotism is impossible without faith, and that Ilia Chavchavadze probably borrowed the slogan from a Georgian monk living in 9th century [18].

VII. MODERN VALUES

One of the characteristics of modernity is revealed through the passage from the traditional-universalistic type of faith to a more tolerant one. By contrast, 84% of the Orthodox Christian population of Georgia think that only their religion is true [8]. As a priest explains in an interview in 2011, "Other religions took the grain of truth from Orthodoxy. An illustration of this is the fact that Muslims do not deny Jesus Christ. … Buddhists cannot deny Him either, considering Him as one of the revelations of Buddha. … They could not avoid Him because He is the absolute truth [19]."

The majority of the clerics interviewed in 2011 openly criticizes "modern western values" and express nostalgic attitudes toward "old glory". The far-away past times are contrasted to modernity and given an unquestionable priority. The past is the denunciator of modernity. The nostalgic attitude is best manifested by part of the clerics' wish to restore monarchy in Georgia [20].

In general, globalization is viewed within the GOC as an unavoidable threat, under the circumstances of which the role of the GOC should grow, so that people choose the right path. Therefore, far from thinking globally (which would make the deprivatization process useful for rationalization), the GOC is still haunted by narrow nationalistic perspectives, and this fact is best revealed in another priest's words: "Either you are Georgian or European. … I am Georgian and will be forever. … In politics, we say we must unite in one system, not leg behind them. The Patriarch emphasized this issue too, [saying] that globalization is fine, we must follow the flow of life, but we should take the good part of it – not the bad part [21]."

The processes of Westernization, globalization and modernization are commonly viewed by Orthodox clerics as evil side forces in the transcendental-religious battlefield. According to this

perspective, the global political system and the modern Western political ideologies bear eschatological signs, whereas the process of globalization itself contains the risk of changing "traditional lifestyle" and system of values [3].

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the deprivatization of religion which is an ongoing fact in modern Georgia does not flow in the form profitable for the rationalization and democratization processes. The GOC may assume such role unintentionally in the future if Georgia chooses the path of civic nationalism instead of the religious one. Although only future will reveal this, near future research could be focused on the position of the society instead of the GOC's so as to see, on the one hand, the actual influence of the GOC on society, and on the other hand, check which type of nationalism the Georgian society bends towards.

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