

## Religious Tolerance in the Republic of Georgia

Paul Crego, Ph.D.

20 July 2004

I have recently returned from a two-week stay in the Republic of Georgia, where my primary task was to obtain religious periodical literature, in part to augment what I had collected in October 2002. I was able to collect more than forty titles, mainly available for sale on the main streets of Tbilisi.

In the several years of its independence the new Republic of Georgia has experienced a series of conflicts. Political battles [including the removal of two sitting presidents], ethnic strife [particularly in South Ossetia and Abkhazia], severe economic hardships, and interference by imperial powers have beset the Georgian nation. Despite these conflicts many have worked for the establishment of a civil society and a democratic state in which basic human rights, including the freedom of religion, are recognized and encouraged.

During this time period religious freedom has been a concept that has sometimes been more a matter of lip service than reality. The dominant Georgian Orthodox Church is still working to fix its place in the new definition of nation; a striving that has been complicated by internal dissention, schisms, and the variety of other religions and Christian denominations, some historical present in Georgia and some not.

At the present time one must also ask what the new government, born of the Rose Revolution in November 2003, and headed by President Mikheil Saakashvili, Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania, and Parliament Speaker Nino Burjanadze, means for the

development of human rights, and specifically for the principles and practice of religious freedom.

The new government has given some mixed signals. The arrest and detention of Fr. Basil Mkalavishvili in March, defrocked priest relating to schismatic Greek Old Calendarists, was a sure sign of progress. His campaign of physical violence and intimidation against non-Orthodox, especially Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, and Baptists and his impunity during Shevardnadze's presidency was sure evidence that Georgian society had some way to go to match its self-claims of tolerance. If it were only the schismatic followers of Fr. Basil who promoted violence with their actions and rhetoric, we would be looking now more hopefully for a time of peaceful religious co-existence. Priests of the Georgian Orthodox Church, however, have sometimes participated in violent activity and such an incident occurred during the first week of my visit in Georgia after some Orthodox Christians had called on the Patriarch and the Church to move out of its isolation into a broader participation in the ecumenical movement. At the same time, I was encouraged by Mother Theodora, Abbess of the convent at the Cathedral of Bodbe in Kakhetia [East Georgia], that I not consider the fanatics as representative of the Georgian Church.

Saakashvili, in his inaugural speech and elsewhere, has promoted the idea that Georgia's primary identity as a Christian nation makes it a part of Europe and European civilization. “... at the same time let the return to our rightful place, lost several centuries ago, to the European family, to European civilization, not be forgotten. As a country of a very old Christian civilization we will most certainly return to this place.” Two flags fly now in the Republic of Georgia: the new explicitly Christian five-cross flag and the

multi-starred flag of the European Union. Saakashvili makes reference to the European flag in his inaugural address. This new Georgian flag already leaves out Jews and Muslims. Significantly, Saakashvili does not refer specifically to *Orthodox* Christianity when he speaks of the ancient Christian civilization to which Georgia belongs, in a sense finessing the issue as to how “European” Orthodox Christian nations have been or are now.

Among the hopeful signs under the new government is the creation of a Human Rights Council announced by Saakashvili on 19 July to monitor human rights violations in Georgia and to report to him directly in a monthly meeting. The jury is really still out on whether the practice of the Saakashvili government can meet its talk in the area of human rights, including religious freedom. Perhaps we will learn more if the Georgian Parliament works on legislation concerning religion.

The rehabilitation of Georgia’s first president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, in which Saakashvili has participated, also has implications for the practice of religious tolerance in the Republic of Georgia. Gamsakhurdia, although his self-proclaimed Orthodoxy was overlaid with the anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner, promoted a distinct program of Orthodox Church-Georgian State cooperation in such spheres as education. It is interesting that “Steinerism” has come under attack in *Madli* [Grace], the monthly newspaper of the Georgian Patriarchate. In any event, Gamsakhurdia’s “Georgia for the Georgians” ideology included, for the most part, an insistence on Orthodoxy as a part of Georgian identity.

Baptist Bishop Malkhaz Songhulashvili, with whom I talked while in Georgia, expressed his concern over Gamsakhurdia’s rehabilitation. He is quite convinced that the

current government's profession of democratic principles and the upholding of human rights are contradicted by Gamsakhurdia's rehabilitation.

The most intolerant strains of Orthodoxy claim Zviad Gamsakhurdia as their own. One small religious magazine, in particular, called *Metexi*, has articles by and about Gamsakhurdia, and also articles on the Jewish-Masonic conspiracy that runs the world. It is likely that this magazine represents a small number of people. One could also have made the same claim for Fr. Basil and his thugs, yet it always appeared that this small number of people must have been representing some very powerful people.

Gamsakhurdia himself was a lesson in how we should have paid closer attention to some of the more "offbeat" religious ideas of a would be national leader. It should also be noted that such "conspiracies" against Orthodoxy and true religion are not just in the unsanctioned publications. Eldar Nadiradze, whose book "Who are the Jehovah's Witnesses and How Do They Do Battle Against Orthodoxy" puts the Jehovah's Witnesses in the context of a Masonic conspiracy, has the imprimatur of Metropolitan Anania Japaridze, the house historian among the hierarchs of the Georgian.

Attention to the internal debates within the Georgian Orthodox Church itself are also important as the future of religious tolerance in the Republic of Georgia is assessed. The current Patriarch, Ilia II, has continually lobbied for the preeminence of the Georgian Orthodox Church within the country. The Concordat of October 2002 is testimony to this.

Ilia has been pressured, and has sometimes given into the pressure, of conservatives within the Church. The exit of the Georgian Orthodox Church from various ecumenical bodies in 1997 is an example of the latter. Some have given him the benefit of the doubt on this and related matters. A reading of Ilia's writings, however, would

indicate that he is perhaps more on the side of the conservatives and not completely comfortable with the norms of “western” democratic freedoms. He is fearful of the moral and ethical implications of what he considers to be unbridled freedoms. The Patriarchate openly urges suppression of those “sects” and movements that are not “historical” to Georgia. [The historical list in Georgia: Orthodoxy, Armenian Church, Islam, Judaism, Baptists, Lutherans, and Roman Catholics.] This is done, to some extent, on theological grounds, but also on the premise that non-Orthodox [whether historically Georgian, or not] put the identity of the Georgian nation at risk. This is especially true when the Jehovah’s Witnesses are under consideration; this criticism is also to be kept in mind when the difficult relations between the Georgian Orthodox Church and Roman Catholicism are under consideration. The Patriarch has also been quite outspoken in support of the idea that Abkhazia is historically an “inseparable” part of Georgia.

The Church as a repository of nationalism is something that is quite noticeable these days. Nowhere was it more visible than in the Church of St. Tamar, under construction on Dolidze St. in Tbilisi. While the fresco program awaits its execution, there are several icons with collections of national saints: most notable were the icon of Georgian ruler-saints [mep’eni] and the icon of Georgian queen-saints [dedisup’alni]. Copies of these icons are found in other churches as well.

I made two other observations in the context of religion and nationality while in Tbilisi this year: 1. The Polish inscription is no longer on the cornerstone on the Roman Catholic Church of the Holy Trinity; 2. The sign on the Baptist Church in four languages [Georgian, Armenian, Ossetian, and Russian] is no longer there. My assumption is that these churches do not want to advertise their “foreign” connections.

The struggle for the soul of the Georgian Church between those who desire a more open church and those who want to continue and strengthen its isolation will likely become more intense in the near future. The Patriarch's age means that people will be handicapping the election for his successor. While the contest for the Bishopric of Rome cautions us not to make too many assumptions about the longevity of the incumbent, the jockeying for position can still be instructive. Those who have been described as "fundamentalists" [a term used by Baptist Bishop Malkhaz] would promote less tolerance and would take it upon themselves in the future, as they have in the past, to suppress, sometimes violently, other religions. Others such as Archpriest Basil Kobakhidze are outspoken in their calls for more discussion and promotion from within the church of such issues as religious freedom and a democratic and pluralist society.

Conclusions: Saakashvili wants Georgia to appear tolerant to the West. He knows that this is necessary for both political and financial reasons. Fr. Basil's detention is certainly in support of this. Does he believe other matters are off the "radar screen?" Perhaps. It is too early to give a firm answer. More important, I believe, is the struggle within the Georgian Orthodox Church itself and among its future leaders and this in the context of how the Church continues to insist that it is a primary denominator of national identity.