Religion in the South Caucasus

Tradition, Ambiguity, and Transformation

Sophie Zviadadze | ORCID: 0000-0002-3683-5531

School of Arts and Sciences, Ilia State University, Tbilisi, Georgia

sopiko.zviadadze@iliauni.edu.ge

The aim of this special issue is to illuminate, at least in part, the heterogeneous religious landscape of the South Caucasus countries by looking at the different historical and cultural backgrounds, the Soviet legacy, nationalism, and particular religious cultures around which the countries are shaped. This special issue provides insights into the ambiguity of the political and national dimensions of religions in the region, as well as the varieties of religious beliefs and practices. This issue seeks to demonstrate the complex and varied religious dynamics in the South Caucasus, starting from the privatization of religion, as well as the publicizing of religion, all the way down to diversity in the forms of religious expression (vernacular religiosity, rising political Shi'ism, Orthodox Christian mobilizations, etc.).

The South Caucasus as a political and cultural space is like a kaleidoscope that contains two 'optic mirrors' creating a diverse image. The first 'mirror' is the external, projected outlook of the region that the Russian Empire, Europe, the Ottoman Empire, and, later, the modern international community have developed over the course of history. This projection conjures images, such as an exotic borderland, a crossroad or a bridge between Europe and Asia, a periphery of empires, and a hotbed of conflicts.¹ The second 'mirror' is the self-perception of nations and ethnic groups residing in a modest geographical area of the Caucasus. This latter perception is more diverse, ever changing, sometimes controversial, and does not always match the view of the 'outside'

1 Victor A. Shnirelman, *The Values of the Past: Myths, Identity and Politics in Transcaucasia* (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2001); Svante Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus* (London & New York: Routledge, 2005); and Tsypylma Darieva & Wolfgang Kaschuba (eds.), *Representations of the Margins of Europe: Politics and Identities in the Baltic and South Caucasian States* (Frankfurt & New York: Campus, 2011).

world. As for the political content of ‘the Caucasus,’ it emerged in the nineteenth century, under the Russian Empire that embraced the geographical area covering the territory between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, which was divided into the North Caucasus and South Caucasus. The South Caucasus is, indeed, a crossroad of cultures and religions, a place commonly referred to by scholars as a “museum of peoples.”² The three sovereign states of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan—comprising the South Caucasus of today—have continued to maintain Caucasian diversity. All three states emerged as democratic republics in 1918. Though short lived (the Georgian republic survived three years, while Azerbaijani and Armenian independence lasted two years), this period has played an important role in shaping the modern political discourse and state-building of these states. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, all three republics managed to reclaim their independence. The period of post-Soviet transition saw radical systemic changes affecting all societal spheres, including the religious sphere. In all countries, religion reemerged in the public space with the visibility of religious symbols and influences over public opinion, political orientation, and in shaping nationalism. In particular, contemporary Georgian society is faced with significance of religion in everyday life, with the authority and ‘visibility’ of the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) and its influence over political affairs. Meanwhile, even though support for secularism is strong in Azerbaijan, religious discourse often serves as a source of political instrumentalization. Moreover, Islam has become a conduit of political activism, and the emergence of more active Islam-based social movements has increased over the years.³

The question for this issue is what common and distinctive characteristics accompany religious transformation in the South Caucasus. A transition from a Soviet secular ideology to a society with a vitality of religiosity—which is seen in the religious transformation in the South Caucasus—shows a trend of ‘desecularization,’ in terms of Peter L. Berger’s notion, and signs of the ‘deprivatization of religion.’⁴ In order to explain rising religiosity in post-socialist countries, scholars refer to the specifics of religious culture in these countries.⁵

2 Cornell, *Small Nations*, 4.

3 Fuad Aliyev, “Islamic Activism as a Social Movement: Recent Issues of Religion and Politics in Azerbaijan,” *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 72 (2015), 3–6.

4 Peter L. Berger, “The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview,” in: Peter L. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Washington DC: Eerdmans, 1999), 1–18; and José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago & London: Chicago University Press, 1994).

5 Pippa Norris & Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular Religion and Politics Worldwide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

They also see this process as a result of the experience of repression of religions in Soviet times and an ideological vacuum in a time of social and political post-Soviet transition.⁶

Paradigmatically, scholars are skeptical of the ‘compatibility’ of secularism with Orthodox Christianity or Islam.⁷ David Martin argues that secularism might well be a phenomenon that is typical only to Western societies.⁸ The extent to which the process of secularization can be foreseen beyond Western society remains a question for discussion to date.⁹ Some scholars assume that secularization awaits post-socialist countries.¹⁰ Miklós Tomka argues that post-socialist countries offer a different and more complex picture of religious transformation.¹¹ The main features of the changing religious field here is the rising importance of religion.¹² In his acclaimed article about desecularization, Berger argues that what, in fact, has to be scientifically explained, is the absence of religion in modern society rather than its presence.¹³ Following this line of thinking, we argue that post-Soviet countries, particularly in the South Caucasus, are faced with a different desecularization process. Factors that many have used to explain the features of religious transformation in these countries include shared experiences of a totalitarian system and policy regarding religion, the intersection of nationalism and religiosity, and the delayed process of the development of a nation-state.¹⁴ Also, the history of respective religious traditions in their specific cultural and political settings needs to be taken into

6 Detlef Pollack, “Renaissance des Religiösen? Veränderungen auf dem religiösen Feld in ausgewählten Ländern Ost- und Ostmitteleuropas,” *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 51 (2011), 109–140.

7 David Martin, “Europa und Amerika: Säkularisierung oder Vervielfältigung der Christenheit—Zwei Ausnahmen und keine Regel,” in: Otto Kallscheuer (ed.), *Europa der Religionen: Ein Kontinent zwischen Säkularisierung und Fundamnetalismus* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1996), 161–180; and Peter L. Berger, “Christianity and Democracy: The Global Picture,” *Journal of Democracy* 15/2 (2004), 76–80.

8 Ibid.

9 Gerd Pickel & Kristina Sammet (eds.), *Transformation of Religiosity: Religion and Religiosity in Eastern Europe 1989–2010* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2012).

10 Detlef Pollack, “Religiousness Inside and Outside the Church in Selected Post-communist Countries of Central and Eastern Europe,” *Social Compass* 50/3 (2003), 321–334.

11 Miklós Tomka, “The Changing Social Role of Religion in Eastern and Central Europe: Religion’s Revival and Its Contradictions,” *Social Compass* 42/1 (1995), 17–26.

12 Pollack, “Renaissance.”

13 Berger, “The Desecularization.”

14 Winfred Spohn, “Europeanisation, Multiple Modernities and Religion: The Reconstruction of Collective Identities in Post-communist Central and Eastern Europe,” in: Gerd Pickel & Kristina Sammet (eds.), *Transformation of Religiosity: Religion and Religiosity in Eastern Europe 1989–2010* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2012), 29–50, at 30.

consideration. Similar to scholarly conceptualizations of ‘multiple Islams,’ we need to consider ‘multiple Christianities’ in the Georgian and Armenian context.¹⁵

The South Caucasus countries are characterized by their representative majority religions: 96% of Azerbaijan’s population are Muslim, including approximately 65% Shi’a and 36% Sunni.¹⁶ Meanwhile, 83.41% of Georgia’s population identify themselves as Christians and as belonging to the GOC.¹⁷ In Armenia, 95% of the population belongs to the Armenian Apostolic Church (AAC).¹⁸ The dominant religious groups shape normativity, features of nationalism, and interrelations between religion and politics in the South Caucasus countries. The rising significance of religion and the sustained reputation of religious leaders have further cemented the national-cultural meaning of religion in Georgia and Armenia. The importance of religion in terms of cultural and national identity is an idiosyncrasy of religious culture in Georgia, as well as in Armenia.¹⁹ About 81% of respondents in Georgia and 82% in Armenia see religion as a key component of national identity.²⁰ The Armenian Apostolic Church is considered the ‘national church,’ and it is enshrined in the country’s constitution (Article 8.1). The Georgian constitution from 1995 emphasizes the role of the GOC in Georgian history. Furthermore, the symbolic and cultural dominance of the GOC was confirmed in 2002 in a constitutional agreement between the state and the GOC. The intertwined nature of religion and ethnonationalism in Georgia and Armenia may be viewed as a reaction to religious pluralization during the post-Soviet transition. However, its roots go fur-

-
- 15 Abdul Hamid El-Zein, “Beyond Ideology and Theology: The Search for the Anthropology of Islam,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 6 (1977), 227–254; and Talal Asad, “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,” *Qui Parle* 17/2 (2009), 1–30.
 - 16 Office of International Religious Freedom, “2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Azerbaijan,” 12 May 2021. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/azerbaijan/> (accessed 20 October 2021).
 - 17 According to the 2014 national census data, the second largest religion after Christianity in Georgia is Islam (10.7%), followed by members of the Armenian Apostolic Church (2.94%).
 - 18 Yezidis constitute the largest religious minority group.
 - 19 Konrad Siekierski, “‘One Nation, One Faith, One Church’: The Armenian Apostolic Church and the Ethno-religion in Post-Soviet Armenia,” in: Alexander Agadjanian (ed.), *Armenian Christianity Today: Identity Politics and Popular Practice* (London & New York: Routledge, 2014), 9–34.
 - 20 Pew Research Center, “Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe,” 10 May 2017. <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/RELIGIOUS-BELIEF-AND-NATIONAL-BELONGING-IN-CENTRAL-AND-EASTERN-EUROPE/> (accessed 22 October 2021).

ther back. Under the Soviet nationalities policy, *korenizatsiia* ('nativization') encouraged the ethnic identity of 'titular nations.'²¹ In each of the republics, the development of nationalism and forms of national culture served the creation of a 'supportive' emotional foundation for the supranational unity of the Soviet Union. Armenians and Georgians were considered 'titular nations' while the culture of other ethnic groups was overshadowed as a result of such policies. As for religion and religious organizations, they were expelled from all spaces including national and cultural spheres. Aggressive Soviet secularism considerably altered the sphere of religion in the South Caucasus. This included the implementation of anti-religious policies in the 1920s and Joseph Stalin's 'taming of religions,' as well as the institutionalization of Islam, which acquired the form of 'official Islam.'²² This period saw a change in social forms of religion. Religion became invisible and 'privatized' and was to be practiced at home, a process known as the 'domestication of religion.'²³

In the national narratives of the South Caucasus countries of the post-Soviet period, the requirement of religion is to fill a double ideological vacuum, a natural manifestation of societal transformation. As a result, "ethnically-tinted memory" started waking up in all three republics, and civic nationalism became dominated by the importance of ethnic and religious belonging instead of markedly secular political discourses characterizing the period of the first republics (1918–1920/1921).²⁴ In Georgia, in the new political and social reality of the post-Soviet period, the GOC—with growing authority—has acquired the function of the protector of nationalism. To this day, sermons of the clergy are saturated with the idea of the promotion of Georgians as the chosen nation and sacralization of everything qualified as Georgian (lan-

21 Martin, "Europa und Amerika."

22 The anti-religious policy dominating the scene in the 1920s and 1930s was changed by a policy of 'recognizing' religions and establishing *muftiates* (Islamic directorates) during World War II. 'Official Islam' was an umbrella term for both Sunni and Shi'a Muslim followers guided by the Baku-centered Spiritual Directorate of Muslims of the Transcaucasia (1944–1992). See Alexandre Bennigsen & Chantal-Lemercier Quelquejaye, "'Official' Islam in the Soviet Union," *Religion State and Society* 7/3 (1979), 148–159.

23 Tamara Dragadze, "The Domestication of Religion under Soviet Communism," in: C.M. Hann (ed.), *Socialism: Ideals, Ideologies, and Local Practice* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), 141–150.

24 Alexander Agadjanian, "Ethnicity, Nation and Religion: Current Debates and the South Caucasian Reality," in: Alexander Agadjanian, Ansgar Jodocke, & Evert van der Zweerde (eds.), *Religion, Nation and Democracy in the South Caucasus* (London & New York: Routledge, 2015), 22–37, at 26; and Giga Zedania, "The Rise of Religious Nationalism in Georgia," *Identity Studies* 3 (2011), 120–128.

guage, history, culture, etc.).²⁵ In both Georgia and Armenia, the dominant religious narratives shape the discourse of ‘who belongs to the nation.’ Both nations are characterized by underscoring a particularly significant historical role for the Christian church related to the history of a respective church. The Armenian Apostolic Church (non-Chalcedonian) and the Georgian Orthodox Church belong to the ancient Christian churches (churches recognized since the fourth century CE) distinguished by church writing, liturgy, autocephaly, and a rich Christian culture. At the same time, the fight for survival amidst invasions of the Islamic world (empires) turned religion into an important marker of nationality. As Danielle Hervieu-Léger maintains, in modern times, religion may serve not only as a source for experiencing spirituality but also as a chain of memories through which knowledge of the past, myths of the formation of a nation, and culture are connected to the present.²⁶ Also, José Casanova argues that the extent to which religion is connected to the past of a nation may account for the vitality of the church and religion in the present day.²⁷ An identity formula commonly shared in Georgia suggests that being Georgian means being an Orthodox Christian similar to the Armenian identification of *hay-k’ristonya* (literally ‘Armenian-Christian’).²⁸

Today, the cultural significance of religion and the church contributes to sustaining the authority of the church in both countries and creates a narrative that has a negative effect on attitudes toward religious minorities and the protection of their human rights. Both in Georgia and Armenia, the respective dominant churches enjoy significant levels of public trust (i.e., in Armenia 76% of the population recognize the AAC as the country’s most trusted institution).²⁹ In Armenia, the emergence of new religious denominations in the period following independence has been perceived as a national threat. Against the backdrop of secularization and growing pluralism, the reaction of the AAC was a cultural defense of some sort that has eventually developed to the extent that the church maintains its influence over the policy of religious

25 Tatia Kekelia, “Building Georgian National Identity: A Comparison of Two Points in History,” in: Alexander Agadjanian, Ansgar Jodocke, & Evert van der Zweerde (eds.), *Religion, Nation and Democracy in the South Caucasus* (London & New York: Routledge, 2015), 120–134.

26 Danielle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

27 Casanova, *Public Religions*.

28 Yulia Antonyan, “Religiosity and Religious Identity in Armenia: Some Current Models and Developments,” *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 56/2 (2011), 315–332.

29 Tigran Matosyan, “Church as Civil Society? Recent Issues of Religion and Politics in Armenia,” *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 72 (2015), 9–12.

diversification.³⁰ The early 1990s was marked with particularly negative attitudes toward religious minorities in Georgia. The state used to turn a blind eye to instances of violations of the freedom of religion against the country's religious minorities. Nowadays, instead of members of Protestant denominations and Jehovah's Witnesses, hate speech now mostly targets members of Muslim communities. In addition, the LGBT community is perceived as an even greater threat by the church, and related moral issues have increasingly been incorporated into the 'national' narrative.

In order to better understand the religious transformation in Azerbaijan, an ambiguity of religion in society and politics should be taken into consideration. Azerbaijan is referred to as a secular state in the scientific literature and public discussions.³¹ Compared to countries with an Islamic culture, including former Soviet republics as well as other Islamic states, the type of secularism in Azerbaijan is striking.³² With regard to religiosity, Azerbaijan lags behind Georgia and Armenia, the forerunners in the post-Soviet space.³³ The reasons lie in Azerbaijan's past, as well as in the specific interrelation of Islam and national identity in today's Azerbaijan. Secularization and non-religious national self-determination are rooted in pre-Soviet and Soviet processes in the second half of the nineteenth century. This period, until the fall of the independent republic in 1920, witnessed a novel type of community: the nation.³⁴ The new national and political re-definition is reflected in the slogan 'Turkism, Modernization, and Islam' originating from Musavat, the leading party of the independent republic of Azerbaijan (1918–1920). Often, Azerbaijani identity is viewed as in transition, whereby Shi'ism, Sunnism, Turkism, and secularism are competing with one another. The process of 'searching for an identity' is also reflected in the current political discourse and the state's religious policy. On the one hand, high-rank state officials underscore the secularity of Azerbaijan, while highlighting the Islamic cultural roots of Azerbaijan, on the other. In

30 Marian Burchardt & Hovhannes Hovannisyan, "Religious vs Secular Nationhood: 'Multiple Secularities' in Post-Soviet Armenia," *Social Compass* 63/4 (2016), 427–443.

31 Elnur Ismayilov, "Islam in Azerbaijan: Revival and Political Involvement," in: Alexander Agadjanian, Ansgar Jodocke, & Evert van der Zweerde (eds.), *Religion, Nation and Democracy in the South Caucasus* (London & New York: Routledge, 2015), 96–111.

32 Ibid, 97.

33 Robia Charles, "Religiosity in Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan," *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 20 (2010), 2–6.

34 Tadeusz Swietochowski, "National Consciousness and Political Orientation in Azerbaijan, 1905–1920," in: Ronald Suny (ed.), *Transcaucasia, Nationalism, and Social Change: Essays in the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 211–234.

post-independence Azerbaijan, Islam may be understood as an ideology that filled the post-Soviet ideological vacuum, whereby political elites are willing to keep Islam as an important marker of national identity while maintaining a secular image of the 'new Azerbaijani identity' too.³⁵ The history of the first republic in Azerbaijan (the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic) serves as a pillar of the idea of 'secularism' for Azerbaijani politicians. On 27 May 2015, at the celebration of the country's 'Republic Day,' President İlham Aliyev said that the republic of Azerbaijan was a historical phenomenon of global importance in that Azerbaijan became the first democratic country in the Islamic world.³⁶ At the same time, Islam remains part of the political field. While making political statements in independent Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev would often cite the Koran. In addition, President Heydar Aliyev's pilgrimage to Mecca was commonly given considerable media attention; being a true believer was a notion constantly mentioned to the public.³⁷ The metamorphosis of the Secretary of the Central Committee in Soviet Azerbaijan eerily resembles former Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze's christening in 1992, building an informal yet politically cemented 'rapprochement' between the state and the church as an instrument to reinforce their respective authority. In both cases, the leaders of the new states were trying to play down the Soviet past and cover it up with religious issues.

In today's Azerbaijan, two competing views dominate the public discussion around nationalism and religion: affinity of the Azerbaijani language and cultural identity with that of Turkey, on the one hand, and skepticism toward the idea of Turkism as opposing 'Azerbaijanism,' on the other.³⁸ Shi'ism, also part of Azerbaijan's historical past, brings it closer to Iran, while ethnicity, Sunnism, and the memory of the first secular republic strengthen connectedness with Turkey. This duality is well manifested in the urban space of Baku, the city of the East and the West, with an image embracing both secularism and Islam.³⁹ Therefore, the correlation between religion and national identity in Azerbaijan differs from that in neighboring countries regarding forms of relations between

35 İsmayilov, "Islam," 96.

36 Uwe Halbach, "Religion und Nation, Kirche und Staat im Südkaukasus," *SWP-Studie* S 18 (2016), 35 pp. <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/49229> (accessed 22 October 2021).

37 Raoul Motika, "Islam in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan," *Islam et politique dans le monde (ex-)communiste* 115 (2001), 111–124.

38 Hikmet Hadji-Zadeh (political researcher and civil activist in Azerbaijan), interview by author (Tbilisi: 15 September 2017). Author's private archive.

39 Sevil Huseynova & Hartmut Schröder, "Baku zwischen Orient und Okzident: Der Islam in der postsowjetischen Stadt," *Osteuropa* 65/7–10 (2015), 569–586.

religion and politics and secularism and desecularization. The two denominations of Islam present in the country do not serve as a source of nationwide consolidation.⁴⁰ Unlike its neighbors, Azerbaijan takes pride in its historical experience of the secular state in political discourse. Importantly, one has to take into consideration the specific nature of Islam as a religion and the different historical experiences of Soviet secular policies. However, in 1944—at the time when the state ‘recognized’ traditional institutional forms of Christianity (the Georgian and Armenian churches) that had developed throughout centuries, a secular organization in Azerbaijan was ‘re-established’. The Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of the Transcaucasia, ultimately formed under Soviet authorities, has been referred to as the Department of Muslims of the Caucasus since 1992 and continues to act as a representative body of Muslim organizations. Due to its current image as an ‘almost’ governmental organization, it does not enjoy much trust from the public. In spite of this ambivalent picture, Islam is part of the national identity of Azerbaijanis while Muslim traditions are an important part of Azerbaijani culture and everyday life. However, they are often perceived more as national rather than religious traditions.⁴¹ Islam has been reclaiming its visible presence in the public sphere. The restoration of the Bibi-Heybət Mosque at the city gate and former President Heydar Aliyev’s participation in its opening ceremony are symbolic manifestations of the return of Islam to post-Soviet Azerbaijan.⁴² Some scholars argue that the “return of religiosity” is only manifest in the growing number of mosques under construction and does not indicate the presence of desecularization in Azerbaijan.⁴³ Nevertheless, the construction of mosques, churches, and displays of religious symbols in public spaces in South Caucasian countries are the multivocal symbols. In both Georgia and in Armenia, the construction of the churches are symbolic manifestations of the authority and popularity of the church in the post-Soviet era, and, in addition, the construction of churches in Armenia has been regarded as a manifestation of oligarchic power.⁴⁴ Funding of the construction of churches by the *nouveau riche* was also common in Georgia in the early 1990s, which became a trend among oligarchs with suspicious pasts. The erection of churches also demonstrates relations between reli-

40 Agadjanian, “Ethnicity,” 28.

41 Motika, “Islam,” 2.

42 Huseynova & Schröder, “Baku,” 580. The twelfth-century mosque was destroyed during the Soviet anti-religion campaign in 1936.

43 Ismayilov, “Islam,” 96.

44 Yulia Antonyan, “Political Power and Church Construction in Armenia,” in: Alexander Agadjanian, Ansgar Jodocke, & Evert van der Zweerde (eds.), *Religion, Nation and Democracy in the South Caucasus* (London & New York: Routledge, 2015), 97–111.

gion and politics. For instance, the construction of Sameba (Trinity) Cathedral in Tbilisi (1995–2004) started under Shevardnadze's presidency with funding from the shadowy oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili and opened during former President Mikheil Saakashvili's administration. For all three leaders, the association between their names and the construction of the cathedral was a politically 'desirable' goal.

Using religion to cement political images and reliability is perhaps a trend shared across all three South Caucasian countries. Unlike Georgia, in Armenia, the power balance favors the state. Secular authorities often use religion and the church to meet their political ends, the result of which is the church under the state's control.⁴⁵ Close ties between the state and the church retain particular significance for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Religious aspirations and legitimation are strong mediums for intensifying national sentiments among members of the public.⁴⁶ The existing model of the alliance between the church and the state in Georgia goes back to the Shevardnadze government (1992–2003). This period saw an informal yet politically cemented 'rapprochement,' with both parties relying on this alliance as an instrument to reinforce their respective authority. Patriarch Ilia II and the church emerged as a 'suprapolitical' actor on the political field. The patriarch attended every significant political or public event, whether it be the signing of the constitution or a ceremony for the opening of the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, etc. In the period following the Rose Revolution in 2003, the relationship between the church and the state moved to a new stage. The new political team that ascended to power as a result of the revolution vowed to introduce a secular and liberal-democratic form of governance. It was the first time that the state had made some steps toward eliminating discrimination on the grounds of religion. However, separation of the church and state was far more complicated a project than envisioned. It did not take long before the church could feel the 'modernization effect.' The period between 2004 and 2007 was marked by a latent tension between the church and state, with the former managing to maintain its power and further reinforce its authority against the backdrop of 'accelerated modernization.' Like Shevardnadze, Saakashvili, too, had to resort to the church's support when political crises seemed imminent. During political crises, additional budgetary support for the church was provided by the state from presidential reserve funds to high rank members of the clergy.⁴⁷ This practice was maintained after

45 Harutyun Harutyunyan, "The Role of the Armenian Church During Military Conflicts," *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 20 (2010), 7–9, at 9.

46 Steve Bruce, *Politics and Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 43.

47 Eka Chitanava, "Georgia's Politics of Piety," *Open Democracy*, 30 September 2016.

the major political changes of 2012. The ruling party, the Georgian Dream, continues to act as “the protector of the church and religion,” which was especially evident during the election campaigns of 2020 and 2021 as well as during political crises.⁴⁸ The party portrayed opponents as against religion and the patriarch in an attempt to discredit them. Attending church services during Christian celebrations and public demonstrations of religiosity and loyalty towards the GOC by political elites is not uncommon in Georgia. Behind this political performance, the church possesses real influence over political decisions and public discourse, including in the sphere of human rights.⁴⁹

The specific aspects of the religious landscape in today's Georgia include the ‘visibility of religion’ in the public sphere and the controversial rapprochement between the state and the GOC. Silvia Serrano in her article analyzes “the labile nature of the relationship between religion and politics” in Georgia and suggests the focus should go beyond the mutual instrumentalization of two institutions (the state and the church) in order to understand the diversity of faith-based actors. Serrano differentiates between three main types of the GOC's articulations in post-Soviet Georgian society: one of the main features of this type of effort is the mobilization of Orthodoxy in “the service of nation-building.” In this early stage of rising authority, the GOC has been engaged in the reinterpretation of history and setting new rituals (e.g., the celebration day of 100,000 martyrs). Serrano labels the second type of articulation between religion and politics as ‘populist,’ in the sense of the polarization between the people and the elite. Serrano elaborates the case of ‘Anchiskhati Parishioners’ with regard to how the mobilization of parishioners in favor of the transfer of icons turned into the occupation of public space over a period of twenty years. It refers to a group of parishioners demanding the ‘return’ of the miraculous icon of Anchiskhati—held in a museum—to the church. Over the years,

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/eka-chitanava/georgia-s-politics-of-piety> (accessed 23 October 2021).

48 Radio tavisupleba evropa/Radio tavisupleba რადიო თავისუფალი ევროპა/რადიო თავისუფლება [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty], “ირაკლი ღარიბაშვილი ‘ღირსე ბის მარშზე’: ის პროვოკაცია თავიდან ავიცილეთ,” 3 September 2021. <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31441990.html> (accessed 23 October 2021). All translations by author.

49 The GOC resisted the adoption of anti-discrimination legislation in 2013 and allied with ultra-nationalist groups to hold rallies against the celebration of the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia on an annual basis. Among such groups is the ‘Georgian March,’ an active proponent of homophobic and ultra-nationalistic sentiments. Their suspicious ties with Russian foundations have often been the focus of public discussions. A visit paid by Georgian March leaders to the patriarchate and their meeting with the patriarch triggered a particularly harsh reaction.

a small number of members of this movement settled in the main entrance of the Museum of Fine Arts, in the center of Tbilisi, and constructed some kind of prayer corner with candles, icons, etc. The recent relationship between Orthodoxy and politics comes from the reformulation of public debates in terms of a 'moral crusade.' This type of mobilization is characterized with a stabilization of ideological content, a heterogeneity of actors who stay for "the defense of traditional values."

The dynamics between religion and science, the state and the church, 'liberal secularists' and followers of the GOC, and traditions and modernity were revealed once again in Georgia during the recent pandemic as it started to spread in the spring of 2020. During this time, the Holy Synod, regardless of the high risk of the spread of COVID-19, ruled that all churches would resume their services and that the rules for the sacrament would not be revised. In the public debates that followed, many have vilified the devotees of the GOC and the patriarchate for the lack of social responsibility amidst the pandemic. Mariam Goshadze examines the Eucharist-related debates in Georgia and considers how tensions focused on the communion spoon and its potential to transmit the virus and how it emerged as the symbol of religious backwardness. She tries to illuminate the underlying discourse behind the tension between secular and religious argumentations. The "commotion around the communion spoon" in Georgia reflects the construction of the notion of 'modern religiosity' as deficient, primitive, and inadequate, while stressing the virtue of an "abstracted belief at the expense of embodied religiosity." The author argues how a liberal secularist narrative is leading to the condemnation of material and ritualistic dimensions of Orthodox Christianity.

Behind the scenes of the dominant religions in the South Caucasus, and particularly in Georgia, there are a variety of other religious issues. In Ketevan Gurchiani's article, the Caucasus's cultural and religious pluralism is manifested in the east Georgian village of Gombori. In her rich ethnographic study, the author discloses how Christian and Muslim villagers deploy religion for practicing "everyday diplomacy" and 'performing peace.' Gurchiani explores the hybrid local lay-religious practices around the ritual of Christian baptizing, namely when Christian families invite Muslim godparents to baptize Christian children. Gurchiani analyzes the symbolic and social meanings of this ritual within the concept of *khatri*, which means acting out of love or honor for somebody. The article explains how performing rituals in their own way paradoxically becomes a unifying force and maintains peace in the multi-ethnic and multi-religious village. Meanwhile, Mariam Darchiashvili's article deals with minority religious issues in Georgia and, in particular, Muslim boarding houses in Adjara as networked phenomena. She applies Bruno Latour's

actor-network theory (ANT) and argues that the boarding schools, beyond serving specific objectives, are networks, which facilitate flows and exchanges of humans, ideas, and things in space. At the same time, Darchiahsvili discusses how the state and state-adjacent agencies attempt to control informalities involved in religious networks across the Black Sea border in the field of religion using Marilys Strathern's concept of 'cutting the network.'

A further two articles in the issue relate to the Jewish community in Georgia but they apply different methodological and conceptual approaches. Nino Abakelia's article is based on narratives about the conditions and functioning of synagogues in contemporary Batumi, a multicultural city on Georgia's Black Sea coast. Abakelia explores two (Sephardic and Ashkenazi) synagogues as 'infrastructure' in the anthropological sense through which other objects, people, and ideas operate. The latter article provides insights into the social history of the two Batumi synagogues and the trajectory of the transformation of sacred places. The changing political time and social and cultural environment in the city are reflected in the changing function of the synagogues. Ketikakitelashvili turns to Georgian Jewish identity issues in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and explores the evolution of the duality of their identity. Kakitelashvili argues that the 1910s were a turning point when two competing identity models—religious and national—were developed in the Georgian Jewish community. In the first model, the concept of 'Georgian Israelites' sought a Jewish identity in the religious sense, and, in the second one, the notion of 'Jews of Georgia' underlined the national dimension of identity. In the late nineteenth century, the Georgian national identity with a secular national idea was focused on the concepts of a shared past and culture, which made it possible to reunite the Georgian Jews under Georgian nationhood. In the first Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918–1921), Georgian Israelites as a religious group were recognized at the legislative level, and, on top of that, they had two representatives in the Georgian parliament. As Kakitelashvili argues, apart from pragmatic and ideological factors, the identity of the 'Georgina Israelites' concept reflects the Jewish self-identification with the Georgian culture and state. At the same time, it shows features of the dominant Georgian national narrative of those days, unifying Georgian Jewry within the Georgian cultural and national space.

In her article, Yulia Antonyan opens up the remarkable paths of Soviet and post-Soviet transformation of religiosity in Armenia, in particular the revival and further modification of vernacular religiosity (Christianity). The author examines the devotion of shrines as a manifestation of vernacular religion and, in general, how different political, social, and cultural settings shaped the religious system during the Soviet and the post-Soviet periods. The arti-

cle deals with the questions of what the nature of post-Soviet transformations of religiosity is and how they fit into the post-secular reality. In Soviet times, in the face of suppressed institutional religious practices, various vernacular cults spread under the general concept of '*surb*.' The author describes the sacred landscape in Soviet times as more "natural" and "archaic." Religiosity was reduced to the cult of saints or cults of ancestors. The revival of the devotion of sacred trees and, in general, the cult of shrines could be described as the typical scene of religious life of Soviet times. Antonyan suggests that it was the "neo-archaization" of vernacular religious practice that led to Soviet modernity. In the post-Soviet era, vernacular religiosity faces a new post-secular reality. The AAC takes under its control vernacular shrines, e.g., through a simple consecration of a shrine or acquiring 'the status of a church' to become the property of the AAC. The merging of the vernacular and Orthodox practice was followed by tensions as well as with conciliations between locals (families owned the shrines since Soviet times) and the AAC. In the face of the post-secular reality with mobile or 'nomadic' religiosity, new religious materiality and consumerism, and digital religiosity, we observe the continuity and flexibility of vernacular forms of religiosity in post-Soviet Armenia. Antonyan reasons that the shrines have been transferred from a secularized dimension of cultural heritage to a post-secular dimension of an object of worship, whose value, however, is still associated with its historical authenticity. Altay Goyushov and Kanan Rovshanoglu analyze the rise of transnational political Shi'a activism in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. In late Soviet times, religious-political activists, who did not have any formal religious education gathered in informal organizations. Since the early 2000s, political Shi'ism openly engaged in oppositional political activities in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. The authors examine the political and religious reasons for the rising authority of the new generation of Shi'a leaders. A weakness of the secular opposition created fruitful terrain for the strengthening of Shi'a political thought. The repressions the Azerbaijani government carried out against the secular opposition, civil society, and independent media also influenced the strengthening of political Shi'ism and made it visible in the public sphere. Nevertheless, Goyushov and Rovshanoglu suggest that civil society has not failed, and they do not imagine the dominance of political Shi'ism in the near future in Azerbaijan will come to pass.

The Soviet legacy, including the experience of anti-religion policies and the complicated process of the post-Soviet transition, and complex democratic state-building has shaped the transformation of the religious field in all three republics. Yet, despite this shared experience, the three countries making up the territory regarded as the 'South Caucasus' are not experiencing the same

'adventure.' The South Caucasus remains a space with diverse cultures and religions. This diversity is well represented in the multiple desecularization processes too. We hope that the articles will contribute to a new agenda or at least a new urgency in the study religious issues in the South Caucasus.

References

- Agadjanian, Alexander, "Ethnicity, Nation and Religion: Current Debates and the South Caucasian Reality," in: Alexander Agadjanian, Ansgar Jodocke, & Evert van der Zweerde (eds.), *Religion, Nation and Democracy in the South Caucasus* (London & New York: Routledge, 2015), 22–37.
- Aliyev, Fuad, "Islamic Activism as a Social Movement: Recent Issues of Religion and Politics in Azerbaijan," *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 72 (2015), 3–6.
- Antonyan, Yulia, "Religiosity and Religious Identity in Armenia: Some Current Models and Developments," *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 56/2 (2011), 315–332.
- Antonyan, Yulia, "Political Power and Church Construction in Armenia," in: Alexander Agadjanian, Ansgar Jodocke, & Evert van der Zweerde (eds.), *Religion, Nation and Democracy in the South Caucasus* (London & New York: Routledge, 2015), 97–111.
- Asad, Talal, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," *Qui Parle* 17/2 (2009), 1–30.
- Bennigsen, Alexandre, & Chantal-Lemercier Quelquejay, "'Official' Islam in the Soviet Union," *Religion State and Society* 7/3 (1979), 148–159.
- Berger, Peter L., "The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview," in: Peter L. Berger (ed.), *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Washington, DC: Eerdmans, 1999), 1–18.
- Berger, Peter L., "Christianity and Democracy: The Global Picture," *Journal of Democracy* 15/2 (2004), 76–80.
- Bruce, Steve, *Politics and Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003).
- Burchardt, Marian, & Hovhannes Hovannisyan, "Religious vs Secular Nationhood: 'Multiple Secularities' in Post-Soviet Armenia," *Social Compass* 63/4 (2016), 427–443.
- Casanova, José, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago & London: Chicago University Press, 1994).
- Charles, Robia, "Religiosity in Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan," *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 20 (2010), 2–6.
- Chitanava, Eka, "Georgia's Politics of Piety," *Open Democracy*, 30 September 2016. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/od-russia/eka-chitanava/georgia-s-politics-of-piety> (accessed 23 October 2021).
- Cornell, Svante, *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus* (London & New York: Routledge, 2005).
- Darieva, Tsypylma, & Wolfgang Kaschuba (eds.), *Representations of the Margins of*

- Europe: Politics and Identities in the Baltic and South Caucasian States* (Frankfurt & New York: Campus, 2011).
- Dragadze, Tamara, "The Domestication of Religion under Soviet Communism," in: C.M. Hann (ed.), *Socialism: Ideals, Ideologies, and Local Practice* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), 141–150.
- El-Zein, Abdul Hamid, "Beyond Ideology and Theology: The Search for the Anthropology of Islam," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 6 (1977), 227–254.
- Halbach, Uwe, "Religion und Nation, Kirche und Staat im Südkaukasus," *SWP-Studie* S 18 (2016), 35 pp. <https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/49229> (accessed 22 October 2021).
- Harutyunyan, Harutyun, "The Role of the Armenian Church During Military Conflicts," *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 20 (2010), 7–9.
- Hervieu-Léger, Danielle, *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000).
- Huseynova, Sevil, & Hartmut Schröder, "Baku zwischen Orient und Okzident: Der Islam in der postsowjetischen Stadt," *Osteuropa* 65/7–10 (2015), 569–586.
- Ismayilov, Elnur, "Islam in Azerbaijan: Revival and Political Involvement," in: Alexander Agadjanian, Ansgar Jodocke, & Evert van der Zweerde (eds.), *Religion, Nation and Democracy in the South Caucasus* (London & New York: Routledge, 2015), 96–111.
- Kekelia, Tatia, "Building Georgian National Identity: A Comparison of Two Points in History," in: Alexander Agadjanian, Ansgar Jodocke, & Evert van der Zweerde (eds.), *Religion, Nation and Democracy in the South Caucasus* (London & New York: Routledge, 2015), 120–134.
- Martin, David, "Europa und Amerika: Säkularisierung oder Vervielfältigung der Christenheit—Zwei Ausnahmen und keine Regel," in: Otto Kallscheuer (ed.), *Europa der Religionen: Ein Kontinent zwischen Säkularisierung und Fundamnetalismus* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1996), 161–180.
- Matosyan, Tigran, "Church as Civil Society? Recent Issues of Religion and Politics in Armenia," *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 72 (2015), 9–12.
- Motika, Raoul, "Islam in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan," *Islam et politique dans le monde (ex-) communiste* 115 (2001), 111–124.
- Office of International Religious Freedom, "2020 Report on International Religious Freedom: Azerbaijan," 12 May 2021. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-report-on-international-religious-freedom/azerbaijan/> (accessed 20 October 2021).
- Pew Research Center, "Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe," 10 May 2017. <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/RELIGIOUS-BELIEF-AND-NATIONAL-BELONGING-IN-CENTRAL-AND-EASTERN-EUROPE/> (accessed 22 October 2021).
- Pickel, Gerd, & Kristina Sammet (eds.), *Transformation of Religiosity: Religion and Religiosity in Eastern Europe 1989–2010* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2012).

- Pollack, Detlef, "Religiousness Inside and Outside the Church in Selected Post-communist Countries of Central and Eastern Europe," *Social Compass* 50/3 (2003), 321–334.
- Pollack, Detlef, "Renaissance des Religiösen? Veränderungen auf dem religiösen Feld in ausgewählten Ländern Ost- und Ostmitteleuropas," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 51 (2011), 109–140.
- Norris, Pippa, & Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular Religion and Politics Worldwide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- Radio tavisupali evrop'a/Radio tavisupleba რადიო თავისუფალი ევროპა/რადიო თავისუფლება [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty], "ირაკლი ღარიბაშვილი 'ღირსების მარშზე': ის პროვოკაცია თავიდან ავიცილეთ," 3 September 2021. <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/31441990.html> (accessed 23 October 2021).
- Siekierski, Konrad, "'One Nation, One Faith, One Church': The Armenian Apostolic Church and the Ethno-religion in Post-Soviet Armenia," in: Alexander Agadjanian (ed.), *Armenian Christianity Today: Identity Politics and Popular Practice* (London & New York: Routledge, 2014), 9–34.
- Shnirelman, Victor A., *The Values of the Past: Myths, Identity and Politics in Transcaucasia* (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2001).
- Spohn, Winfred, "Europeanisation, Multiple Modernities and Religion: The Reconstruction of Collective Identities in Post-communist Central and Eastern Europe," in: Gerd Pickel & Kristina Sammet (eds.), *Transformation of Religiosity: Religion and Religiosity in Eastern Europe 1989–2010* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2012), 29–50.
- Swietochowski, Tadeusz, "National Consciousness and Political Orientation in Azerbaijan, 1905–1920," in: Ronald Suny (ed.), *Transcaucasia, Nationalism, and Social Change: Essays in the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 211–234.
- Tomka, Miklós, "The Changing Social Role of Religion in Eastern and Central Europe: Religion's Revival and Its Contradictions," *Social Compass* 42/1 (1995), 17–26.
- Zedania, Giga, "The Rise of Religious Nationalism in Georgia," *Identity Studies* 3 (2011), 120–128.