

LIVING ON THE EDGE¹

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The Republic of Georgia, in its present iteration, is one of the successor states of the Soviet Union. It has a long and complex history, alternating between periods of independence and imperial domination. Prior to the breakup of the Soviet Union the most recent time of independence lasted not quite three years, from May 1918 to February 1921. Before annexation to the Russian Empire in 1801, Georgia, rarely as a whole, but often in collections of its parts, experienced various levels of independence.

Georgia is located on the edge of many historical and cultural spheres of influence. This has brought both blessing and curse; all the while "enriching," albeit not always voluntarily, the Georgian language, its people, and their culture. It is on the divide between Europe and Asia, in geography as well as construct. It is where Kipling's twain of East and West have, contrary to the maxim, indeed met. It is on the divide between Christian and Muslim. Within Christianity it is on the border between Churches in communion with the Patriarch of Constantinople and those, such as the Armenian Church, that are not. It has been in the Persian sphere of influence, the Arabic/Muslim sphere of influence; the smaller spheres of Syriac and Armenian Christian influence. It has been on the edge of the Ottoman Turkish Empire as well on the boundary of the Russian Empire; also in its later manifestation as the Soviet Union. It is now government policy to define Georgia as European and Christian; although the predominant Orthodox Church of Georgia is uncomfortable with some of the implications of such a policy, especially in the context of a pluralism that would encourage "rival" sects, denominations, or religions.

The "choices," if you will, of Georgian national self-identity are quite instructive in the fluidity of geographical "realities" as confronted by historians, politicians, church leaders,

¹ I am using the Library of Congress romanization tables to cite sources in non-Roman alphabets and have supplied translations of Georgian titles in brackets. A list of other religious periodicals consulted can be accessed at: "An Annotated Bibliography of Georgian Religious Periodicals," <http://www.lib.umich.edu/area/Near.East/MELANotes78/CregoG.pdf>.

and others concerned with geopolitical clashes. It is enough really to bring the whole attempt at such "metageography"² to a screeching halt.

When the Soviet Union collapsed at the end of 1991, it took with it an entire system of historiography, worked and re-worked for the seven decades of Soviet rule. This historiography was neither static nor monolithic. It was almost always of a deterministic flavor, but there were indeed variations in what the communist ideologues thought was being determined by economic and other realities. The "new" nations, even those that had existed in one form or another for centuries, were faced with the problem of creating and re-creating new national narratives as a consequence of their liberation.

Georgia had a wealth of sources upon which to draw the re-telling of its national history. At the same time, in the ethnically and politically claustrophobic confines of the Caucasus, competing narratives jockeyed and jostled not only for rhetorical space, but for facts on the ground; i.e. for territory. Internal ethnic conflicts boiled over in Georgia during the last decade of the Soviet period and resulted in the self-declaration of two independent republics, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.³ Much of what is published in Georgia concerns the definition and history of these small territories within or without the broader Georgian narrative.

This paper will survey some of the issues of Georgia's self-definition and what it means for them to exist on several of the boundaries of continents, religions, civilizations, and cultural spheres of influence. I will be studying these interrelated issues as they are discussed in the context of both church and state. I begin with historical background on Georgian identity, including issues of national identity from the Soviet period. I will then explore national identity issues in the new period of Georgian independence, focusing on the way in which Georgian political leaders have included religion in their definitions of Georgian national identity, in their private lives, and in public policy. Part of this discussion will involve relations with the Georgian Orthodox Church. I will further take up some of the

² Martin W. Lewis, Karen E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Lewis and Wigen discuss the history of attempts to divide, define, and categorize the world according to continents and other large land areas, such as the "Middle East." They show how value judgments and prejudices inform what is often assumed to be a more or less objective sets of geographical manipulation.

³ These territories, not having any internationally recognized status, often act in concert with one another and with the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic, declaring its independence from Azerbaijan, and with the Transnistria Republic, a breakaway section of the Republic of Moldova. Abkhazia and South Ossetia receive much unofficial support from individuals and institutions with the Russian Federation. This support is a major cause of the ongoing tension between Russia and Georgia.

Church's own background as a part of the discussion of national identity and the way in which the Church has related to issues of "East" and "West" over the last two decades.

I start briefly with geography, which at first could appear to be a simple task. When one wishes to "locate" the Republic of Georgia in either Asia or Europe, one could follow the "geographical" definition laid out by such atlas-makers as Rand McNally and boldly proclaim that Georgia, situated south of the main range of the Caucasus Mountains is in Asia. So the Library of Congress now does, even though Georgia was, in subject and classification tables, a European entity during the Soviet period.⁴

For all but the last two centuries, when scholars considered Georgian territory at all, it was mentally located somewhere in the not too distant Orient. European travelers of several nationalities brought back tales of the exotic Christians they found in Georgia.⁵ These Orthodox Christian communities were islands in the large ocean of Islam; the same Islam that was the major concern of European Orientalists who were beginning to classify, categorize, and codify the languages and religions of those people nearest East of "Europe" and then took to the task of doing the same with people of the Indian subcontinent and beyond.⁶

A sort of ecclesiastical Orientalism that sought allies in Roman Catholic vs. Protestant theological battles and political wars generally overlooked the Georgians, though they were Orthodox in communion with the Russians, other Slavic peoples, and with the Greek descendents of the Byzantine Empire. Moscow and Constantinople were consulted by Protestants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These Protestants were disappointed to discover that the Orthodox were not the natural allies against Rome that Protestants thought they should be.⁷ It was again to the Greek and Slavic traditions that others such as the

⁴ And I, whose primary task is to catalog books in Georgian and Armenian, am about to be re-organized into the Southeastern Europe and Caucasus section of the Slavic and Germanic Imprints Division; rather a return to the outer boundaries of Panslavica and away from the Middle East. I say "return" in the library world: few, if any libraries, even the likes of Harvard University, have had Georgian specialists. Russian language catalogers were allowed to catalog Georgian books by Russian colophon titles; with the accompanying note: "T.p. and text in Georgian!"

⁵ One of the most interesting journeys was undertaken by Don Christoforo de Castelli in the seventeenth century. The summaries of his travel were illustrated by dozens of sketches that included fully vested Georgian heierachs. A facsimile of the original Italian text, a transcription, and a translation into Georgian can be found in *C'nobebi da albomi Sak'art'velos šesaxeb.* (T'bilisi: Mec'niereba, 1976).

⁶ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978) 73-92.

⁷ Martin Luther's successor Melanchton and others corresponded with patriarchs in Istanbul. Cf. George Mastrantonis, *Augsburg and Constantinople.* (Brookline, Mass. : Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1982).

nineteenth century Anglican divine John Mason Neale looked for the bulk of the *lux* they thought they could get *ex oriente*.⁸

Ironically, perhaps, Georgia's modern introduction to the concept of Europe, came through the Russian Empire as it grew southward. Skipping over the North Caucasus for a time, Russia took Georgia into its empire by a series of annexations, starting with Kartli-Kaxeti in 1801. The Russian Empire had continued the tradition of Peter the Great in its search for its own "western identity." In this context the Moscow Patriarchate was suspended and the Church, through the Holy Directing Synod, had become a department of state.

One of the consequences of the Russian annexation of Georgian territories was to unite the Georgians in a way that they had not been united since the halcyon days of the Bagratid Empire from the 11th to the 13th centuries. Mongols, Turks, and Persians all exerting their imperial power left Georgia greatly weakened thereafter. The leftover scraps of territory fought each other for what political power remained within these spheres of influence. These internecine competitions only exacerbated what was, until the days of modern communication and transportation, a very fragmented Georgian ethnos: people were more apt to self-identity, for example, as Gurians, Kartlians, Kaxetians, Xevsurs. Dialectical differences as well as differences among the Kartvelian languages added to the diversity of identities. In modern times, Mingrelians and Svans are generally counted as ethnically Georgian,⁹ although they speak different languages; both groups have used Georgian as a written, and certainly as a liturgical/sacred language.¹⁰

As for a common identity of the Georgian nation in the pre-modern era one might look to the use of Georgian as a liturgical and scriptural, i.e. sacred, language. This is a sort of imagined [not *imaginary*] community, the likes of which Benedict Anderson in his

⁸ Neale wrote a novella called *The Lily of Tiflis* (London : John Henry and James Parker, [1859]), featuring a Georgian queen martyred along with her three small daughters at the hands of Muslims. His incomplete *magnum opus*, *A History of the Holy Eastern Church*, also contained some material on the Georgians. Cf. 61-65 of Part 1 (London: John Masters, 1850). One of Neale's daughters learned the Georgian alphabet and a few words in order to assist her father in evaluating Georgian liturgical texts.

⁹ They are counted as separate in some census records. Those who promote an Abkhaz version of history are usually careful to parse the Georgian nationality into its linguistic varieties as a way of manipulating the numbers of "real" Georgians in a given territory. In response some Georgian scholars will refer to "Abkhaz" as a traditionally Georgian sub-ethnos, whose name was adopted by the "Ap'sua" when they moved into Abkhazia during the Ottoman period.

¹⁰ A passionate discussion ensued when scholars wanted to translate the Bible into Svan and Mingrelian. Discussed in *Literaturuli Sak'art'velo* among other publications, this proposed academic exercise was seen as a serious threat to the unity of the Georgian nation and the Georgian Orthodox Church. The first article by noted philologist Zurab Sarjveladze and Aleksandre Oniani was called "Meti sap'rt'xilea sač'iro," [More caution is necessary] and was published in the 12-19 Dec. 1997 edition of *Literaturuli Sak'art'velo*.

Imagined Communities did not imagine.¹¹ Indeed, as early as the tenth century, Giorgi Merchuli, in his "Life of Grigol of Xandzta," defined Kartli as that territory where the Divine Liturgy is heard in the Georgian language.¹² Since Merchuli was writing in the southwest Georgian territory of Tao-Klarjeti he was speaking of an expanded sense of Kartli on its way to being Sakartvelo; Sakartvelo being the modern and more inclusive term of the Georgians for their homeland.

As modern Georgian national consciousness began to awaken in the nineteenth century, one of the challenges was to overcome the diffusion of identity that characterized communal self-identities on territories where Georgian, or one of the other Kartvelian languages, was spoken.¹³ From within, that identity was strengthened quite intentionally by the Society for the Spread of Literacy Among the Georgians. Iakob Gogebashvili, the society's founder, wrote elementary readers for Georgian children such as *Deda ena* [Mother Tongue] that formed a common starting part for a nation to learn its own language. Georgian newspapers flourished in the last half of the nineteenth century, while the presses were giving rise to a great revival of Georgian literature in the poetry and stories of Akaki Cereteli, Ilia Chavchavadze, Vazha-Pshavela, and others.

At the same time, political ideas of nineteenth century Europe made their way to Georgia, usually by way of Georgians studying in Russia or through Russian translations of important works.¹⁴ In this context, it was toward the end of that century when Georgians of various political perspectives began self-consciously to raise the issue as to whether they were properly European or Asian. By then more Georgians had studied in countries to the west of the Russian Empire and these persons continued the process of importing ideas considered "European." Georgian authors, sometimes taken up in romantic ardor, proclaimed their emerging nation to be a crossroads between East and West, Asia and Europe, thereby gathering up the best of both worlds. Grigol Robakidze, in a speech to a delegation of socialist writers, said that Georgians had been waiting for such "chosen children of the West"

¹¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006). Anderson develops his concept along the notion that widespread print media in vernacular languages is nearly essential to the development of a community's national self-identity. Having dismissed Latin as a community-building language, he does not consider "hearing communities," such as those, e.g. Armenians and Georgians, who heard a liturgy in their respective common *intelligible* tongues.

¹² "C'xorebay Grigol Xanc't'elisay," in Ilia Abulaže, ed., *Žveli k'art'uli agiograf'iuli žeglebi*. (T'bilisi: Sak'art'velos SSR Mec'nierebat'a akademiis gamomc'emloba, 1963) vol. 1, 290.

¹³ One might argue that the notion of Europe itself was a rather late addition to the sum of communal identities.

¹⁴ A discussion of what was available to the Georgians in the nineteenth century can be found in: Rusudan Daušveli, *Evropuli saistorio XIX saukunis meore naxevis Sak'art'veloši*. (T'bilisi: 2003).

to visit. He spoke of Georgia's identity, though of Eastern content, as containing "something unknown" that had come from the West.¹⁵

As socialism, often in some sort of Marxist variety, became stronger in the Russian Empire, and particularly so in Georgia, the question of the Georgian nation's place within the Empire and its Europeanness became matters of some contention. Georgian Marxists were caught between the notion that it was properly revolutionary to uphold the rights of small nations against imperial power, on the one hand; and on the other, there was the essential axiom that socialism in Russia and its imperial lands must become internationalist in its perspective.¹⁶

Noe Zhordania, a member of the Menshevik wing of the Russian Social- Democratic Labor Party, who later became president of the Republic of Georgia in 1918, was quite clear that Georgia needed to seek out its European identity in order to mature as a nation on the way to its socialist identity:¹⁷

We have started in a new time, not just as an ethnographic group but as Georgian people, with our own history, culture, and customs. This is the national soil on which we will build a European civilization ... "Georgianness" and "Europeanness," this is the [Georgian people's] banner ... With us, the aspiration for "Europeanness" is so strong that it has created a crisis. This crisis is the essence of "Europeanization" – it is economic development.

One of the most important differences between Zhordania's idea of European civilization with its foundation in economic development and the consequences of that development and the current President Mixeil Saakashvili's concept of European civilization is the role that religion, democracy, and human rights play. Europe, and therefore, what constitutes being "European," has indeed changed over the course of the twentieth century. Two devastating world wars fought on European soil and the rollback of empires in the second half of the twentieth century are important to understanding these changes.

Before examining the quest for European integration that has become an important part of Georgia's self identity in the latter part of the twentieth century and into the twenty-

¹⁵ Orjonikize, Iza, ed., *Evropa t'u Asia?* (T'bilisi: "Literaturis matiane", 1997) 275-277.

¹⁶ This essential contradiction would be worked into Bolshevik nationalist ideology by Lenin and Stalin. Their essays on the national issue spoke of self-determination as an important principle. They believed, however, that the correct proletarian "determination" would be for the small nations of the Russian Empire to join together in working toward the communist future.

¹⁷ Quoted in Stephen Jones, *Socialism in Georgian Colors*. (Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 2006) 62.

first, some comments need to be made on Georgia's Soviet experience as this had its impact on the development of Georgia's national identity.

The interlude of nearly seven decades of Soviet rule was a surreal series of twists and turns in the encouragement and discouragement of ethnic and national group identity within Soviet political culture. At the time of the Bolshevik Revolution it was thought by many "Orthodox" Marxists that West European nations with more advanced capitalist and industrialized economies would be the site of true proletarian revolution.¹⁸ The Bolsheviks, exploiting a war weary Russian society and weak Russian government, and aided by the strict party discipline of Lenin, were able to justify this turn of events that did not adhere to the received "orthodoxy" of historical determinism. Many true believers, clinging to the remnants of older orthodoxies, thought that revolution would spread from "east" to "west" after the end of the Great War. The revolutionary movement, however, fizzled at the Russo-Polish border as the Poles managed, for a time, to escape Russian domination; other revolutions in Europe were stillborn.

The principles of internationalism continued to have an overriding part in the official party line. At the same time, Stalin, first as Commissar of Nationalities, and then as he consolidated state and party leadership titles, constructed the quasi-national structure of the Soviet Union, said to be "national in form and socialist in content." What this meant varied, although it is safe to say that obedience to the State and to Stalin, as its primary incarnation, eventually overthrew any particular meaning that the "national in form" part of this slogan may have represented.

For a time, jurisdictions arranged according to national and ethnic demographic realities reached into small territories and villages, such that a mosaic of small ethnically defined tesserae was created. Education and language rights were parceled out according to this scheme, especially during the time of the New Economic Policy began by Lenin.¹⁹ It seemed that the development of national and ethnic identities was being fostered. This fragmentation, however, would have made it more difficult in some areas to focus attention on larger group identities. The creation of the mythical *Homo soveticus* was, moreover, the ultimate goal of internationalist socialist humanity. In any event, those who took this nationalist policy of the 1920s as an opportunity to develop national identities within the

¹⁸ It is a curious phenomenon that the Marxist government of the Soviet Union with its satellites became the "East," i.e. the "Other," despite the "West" European origin of its predominant ideology.

¹⁹ Martin, Terry, *Affirmative Action Empire*. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001).

Soviet context fell victim to various of Stalin's purges in the 1930s, when accusations of bourgeois nationalism were a common addition to others leveled against "enemies of the state."

The problem of small ethnic jurisdictions was especially acute in the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. Three territories were granted autonomous status within the borders of the Georgian S.S.R.: the Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, the Ajarian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, and the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast. The Abkhazian and Ossetian territories were maintained, even though their titular nationalities became minorities within their own areas and the Ajarian territory, in an officially atheist state, demarked not an ethnic enclave, but a territory where many Georgians had under Turkish rule converted to Islam. The Soviet creation of these border lines has defined much of the post-Soviet political conflict in Georgia and the difficulties of Georgia asserting its territorial self-definition and integrity.

It should be noted that the atomization of ethnic group rights ultimately did not mean an expansion of individual rights. One gained the right to education, to some extent, in one's native language, according to the identity of groups with certain territories. At the same time those rights of identity could be given and taken away by executive fiat with no input from the groups or individuals involved. A Soviet Socialist Republic's titular nationality was generally favored over that of an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic; an A.S.S.R.'s nationality was, in turn, generally favored over that of an Autonomous Oblast.

Two further phenomena from the Soviet period are especially important to the re-birth of national and ethnic narratives: language policy and the place that ethnogenesis was given in the Soviet narrative of historical determinism.

Although the default language of *Homo soveticus* was certainly Russian, many languages were allowed to remain, some even to flourish, under Soviet rule. Dozens of languages that previously had little or no written history were given alphabets for the first time.²⁰ These alphabets strengthened the national identity of some groups in ways that the Soviet rulers could not have foreseen. On the other hand, the system often resulted in the

²⁰ The history of alphabets is complicated in that many historically Muslim groups, some of which had writing in the Arabic script, were first given Latin, and then Cyrillic, scripts. By this change of scripts older, and therefore less reliable, books were made more or less unintelligible.

breakdown of larger language identities into smaller ones, so that dialectical differences came to define separate languages.²¹

The Georgians, along with their Armenian comrades, possessed literatures in their own alphabets, both several centuries more ancient than the Cyrillic Russian alphabet. The Soviet government, by and large, did not challenge the use of these alphabets; to have done so would have caused instant rebellion, even perhaps in the most repressive of times. When the constitutions of the constituent republics were being re-written in 1978, an attempt was made to delete mention of Georgian as one of the official languages of the Georgian S.S.R. Mass demonstrations followed in Tbilisi and Eduard Shevardnadze who was the local ruler at the time did not call in troops to suppress the demonstrations, but rather orchestrated the re-insertion of Georgian's official status in the constitution.²²

In addition, Soviet historiography came to require a set of pre-determined stages in the life of a nation or ethnic group. An entire academic enterprise was born of this perceived need to create proto-histories. The fact that there was often little or no data to support the ancient origins served as no bar to their invention as a prop for ethnic historiography. Each group needed a primitive phase upon which the later determined phases of feudalism, etc. would be derived. Pavel Ingoroqva, among others, was instrumental in writing the history of the ancient Georgians.²³

At the breakup of the Soviet Union the competing claims of national and ethnic groups became a matter of no small consideration. In the days when such claims were generally and merely academic exercises, contradictions held little meaning. The shape of ethnic jurisdiction, already in some cases an arbitrary matter, was based on a number of different factors, not necessarily on any ancient claim of a group to any particular territory.²⁴ When the fall of the Soviet Union led to territorial disputes, such as those between the Abkhazians and the Georgians in what had been the Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Socialist

²¹ Thus the split of Abkhaz and Abaza into separate languages. Cf. George Hewitt's introduction in *The North West Caucasian Languages*. (Delmar, N.Y.: Caravan Books, 1989) 15: "Whilst Abaza is linguistically so close to Abkhaz as to be open to treatment as a divergent dialect, it exists today as an independent literary language of the USSR and in recognition of this is here allotted its own description."

²² Eduard Ševardnaze, *P'ik'ri carsulsa da momavalze: memuarebi*. (T'bilisi: Palitra L, 2006) 98.

²³ His *Giorgi Merčule : k'art'veli mcerali meat'e saukunisa : narkvevi žveli Sak'art'velos literaturis, kulturis da saxelmcip'oebrivi c'xovrebis istoriidan* is an important example of a work in which ethnogenesis plays a large part. His insistence that the historical sources support a more or less monoethnic picture of Georgian territory remains a serious bone of contention in the current conflicts.

²⁴ The ultimate caricature of this process was the autonomous region set aside for Jews in Birobidzhan, in the Siberian far east of the Soviet Union.

Republic, primordial histories became cudgels by which one could beat one's opponent about the head.²⁵

As maps were being redrawn in 1991-1992, the new countries which succeeded the Soviet Union began to "re-imagine" national narratives that had become twisted and skewed. For the Georgians this meant reclaiming the glories of their ancient and medieval past, as well as rehabilitating the memory of their short-lived independent republic.²⁶ The new Georgian narrative also included religious identity, almost exclusively in the context of Orthodox Christianity.

Post-Soviet Georgia may be arranged chronologically according to three heads of state: Zviad Gamsaxurdia, Eduard Shevardnadze, and Mikheil Saakashvili. Gamsaxurdia gained control in the fall of 1990 after multi-party parliamentary elections brought his Round Table coalition to power. He was elected president by an overwhelming majority in the spring of 1991, but was ousted, ironically, at nearly the same time of the collapse of the Soviet Union. There had been no more bitter enemy of Soviet rule in Georgia than Zviad Gamsaxurdia. Within a few months Shevardnadze regained control of the country that he had left to become Mikhail Gorbachev's Foreign Minister. He was elected to two terms as president, but his second term was cut short by the Rose Revolution in November 2003 after a seriously flawed parliamentary election was greeted by a popular and bloodless revolt. After a brief interim Saakashvili was elected president in early January 2004 and took office later in that same month.

The new awakening of Georgian self-identity had begun in the late Soviet period. It is no exaggeration to say that Soviet power died on the morning of 9 April 1989 when a demonstration in the center of Tbilisi was broken up with lethal force. The Soviet Union, whatever national "form" it appeared to offer, had remained the organizing principle for its subject nations and ethnic groups, but Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost'* had opened the door to a myriad of new ideas and criticism of the old regime.

Gamsaxurdia and Shevardnadze both benefitted, to a degree, by outside misperceptions of their personalities and ideologies. Zviad Gamsaxurdia had been a leading

²⁵ The author once attended a forum on the Georgian/Abkhaz conflict at the Kennedy School at Harvard. The Abkhaz presenter and many of those who later added comments prefaced their remarks with "I am not a historian ... " Many clearly were not, yet most preceded then to use history as a method of excluding the "Other," in one way or another from the historical narrative of the South Caucasus.

²⁶ Throughout much of the Soviet period *Menshevik* remained an insult, covering the fact that these Mensheviks were also Socialists. The Abkhazians still use it this way as part of their narrative.

dissident during the last two decades of Soviet rule and had spent time as a political prisoner. He was associated with the Helsinki Committee formed in Georgia to monitor the progress of human rights as they had been defined in the Helsinki agreement, to which the Soviet Union had been a signatory party. This made Gamsaxurdia, in the eyes of many, a potential western-style democrat. As Gamsaxurdia's thinking progressed in the 1980s, however, his nationalist messianism became a more prominent feature. He believed that Georgia had a special role to play – a role that came to be defined by a mixture of Orthodox Christianity and anthroposophy derived from the works of Rudolf Steiner.²⁷

Gamsaxurdia, when speaking of Georgia's special role in history, would emphasize, as the Georgian Orthodox Church still does, that this role is derived from Georgia's special relationship with the Blessed Virgin Mary. The received tradition, as it has been developed most in modern times, is that Mary, when lots were being drawn to determine the destinations of apostolic visits, received Georgia as her lot.²⁸ Gamsaxurdia made special mention of this relationship in his inaugural presidential address on 6 June 1991 as the context in which he elaborated a number of different points toward defining a symbiotic relationship between the church and the state. The following refers to the movement that had brought him to power:²⁹

Exactly so, the Georgian national movement has been and is genuinely and closely united with a religious consciousness and in the bosom of the Church. The contemporary movement, in its essence, is a popular-religious movement as it gains understanding not only with the manifestation of national-political purposes, but also envisions a moral rebirth with the assistance of Christian faith and consciousness. The national regime will work to resurrect the traditional unity between church and state.

It may be helpful at this point to say that Gamsaxurdia, less a western-style democrat, was closer in mindset to Alexander Solzhenitsyn. The latter, a favorite of Western human rights organizations, became a disappointment to some, when he emphasized his concerns about the negative implications of Western freedoms. Returning to the "new" Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Solzhenitsyn promoted a sort of messianic pan-Slavism. In any event Gamsaxurdia's presidency was of too short a term to effect any lasting changes on the

²⁷ After Gamsaxurdia's death the Georgian Orthodox Church came to criticize "Steinerism" in Georgia as an unhealthy and unorthodox religious ideology.

²⁸ It is worth noting that this tradition does not shy away from the idea that the Blessed Virgin Mary, a woman, was appointed the original missionary for the Georgian lands. Moreover, the most important figure in the evangelization of the Georgians was St. Nino, a Cappadocian woman who came to Mc'xet'a in the first half of the fourth century. Cf. Stephen H. Rapp and Paul Crego, "The Conversion of K'art'li: the Shatberdi Variant, Kek.Inst. S-1141," *Le Museon*, t. 119: fasc. 1-2: 169-225.

²⁹ *Sak'art'velos respublika*. (7 June 1991).

way in which Georgian self-identity was to be defined in the larger world. The notes he sounded, however, did not fall silent after his fall from power, particularly in terms of the way in which Georgia continued by many to be defined according to its Orthodox identity. This strand of thinking would certainly put the Georgians squarely into the category of the "Orthodox civilization" that Samuel P. Huntington defines in his *Clash of Civilizations*.³⁰

Eduard Shevardnadze, also a favorite of the West and because of a lack of understanding about his personality and the ways in which Soviet and Georgian societies had been organized, was long assumed to conform to the image of him painted by others. His stature in the West had largely been the result of his tenure as Gorbachev's Foreign Minister when the East European part of the Soviet Empire threw off Soviet control. He was given a great deal of credit for the course of events that had a certain amount of their own momentum. His principled resignation in 1991 further enhanced his status in the West.

Whatever Eduard Shevardnadze was in the context of "East vs. West," he was at the right place at the right time, as one would have expected of someone who made a political career out of sensing opportunity. He did not immediately disabuse his Western fans of their assumptions about him, and was able, particularly through his personal friendships with members of the first Bush administration, to win aid for his nation – aid that was then often "spent" in ways that were often far from transparent.

He was among the first nations to proclaim solidarity with George W. Bush and his "War on Terror" following the events of 9/11. He garnered from Bush continuing financial aid, much of it military. He played his end of the Pankisi Gorge controversy to good advantage, all the while playing off the Russians who wanted to use a handful of Chechen fighters as an excuse to threaten the sovereignty of the Republic of Georgia.³¹

For all of his support in the West, and for the beginnings of relationships with various Euro-Atlantic alliances and discussions about "Eurointegration," Shevardnadze, in the end of the day, failed to deliver for his friends, especially those in Washington. Georgia recovered from the dismal economic hardships of 1992-1994, and move toward such democratic features as a vibrant and independent press, arguably at times the freest in post-Soviet space.

³⁰ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

³¹ The Pankisi Gorge is a small valley in the Caucasus Mountains on the border of Georgia and Chechnya. It is inaccessible during the winter months and some Chechen fighters took refuge there. The Russians insisted that Georgia was harboring Islamic terrorists in this area of five small villages. The Pankisi Gorge gained more than its share of attention as the "War on Terror" became the new geopolitical focus in late 2001.

Politics, economics, and much of the grind of daily life in Georgia, however, began to slow under the weight of the gross corruption that characterized all spheres of life. When no less than James Baker came to Tbilisi in the fall of 2003 to encourage Shevardnadze and his government to run a fair and honest parliamentary election, the warnings fell on deaf ears. Perhaps, as our ambassador at the time, Richard Miles, has pointed out, it may have been that Shevardnadze thought he could continue to get a pass from the West by maintaining at least the window dressings of democracy.³² Whatever Shevardnadze thought, the Georgian people led by Mixeil Saakashvili, Nino Burjanadze (Speaker of the Parliament before and after the Rose Revolution), and Zurab Zhvania (one time Green Party leader and protégé of Shevardnadze) quickly brought about regime change.

Being at times the consummate politician Shevardnadze had been careful to play the Orthodox identity card carefully, although with two major mistakes that emphasized just how deeply religious identity issues are engrained in the post-Soviet development of Georgian identity. Shevardnadze himself was baptized in late 1992 under the name of Giorgi, recalling the importance of St. George as a protector of the Georgian people.³³ In a collection of articles commemorating Shevardnadze's seventieth birthday, Patriarch Ilia II takes up the question of whether Shevardnadze's baptism was sincere or whether it was for political show. Ilia is quite certain about the sincerity of Shevardnadze.³⁴ "Giorgi" Shevardnadze also financed the construction of the Church named for King David the Builder near the ruins of the Nariqala Fortress that overlook the old part of the city of Tbilisi.

Shevardnadze's two mistakes involved supporting a proposed traveling exhibit of Georgian artifacts in the United States and the development of a concordat with the Vatican.

The exhibition entitled *The Land of Myth and Fire: The Art and Culture of Ancient and Medieval Georgia* was to have been mounted first at the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, Maryland and was sponsored primarily by the Foundation for International Arts and Education. The exhibit itself was to have included a wealth of Georgian artifacts from

³² Ambassador Miles expressed this opinion in a talk he gave at the Library of Congress on 25 September 2006.

³³ St. George is *not*, however, the source of Georgia's name. Rather, "Georgia," is derived from the Persian *Gurjia*. The Georgians refer to their country as *Sak'art'velo*, i.e. the place of the K'art'veli.

³⁴ Ilia II, "Nat'loba," *Ševardnaže*. (T'bilisi: "Samšoblo p'orte", 1998) 23-25.

several millennia, but it was specifically items of Christian Orthodox importance that became the foci of opposition and protest among the Georgians.³⁵

The alienation of religious artifacts was described in stark terms. The essential sacred character of the icons, manuscripts, liturgical vessels, and the like, was said to be a serious misuse of these items: "... the exhibition is a sin. The [artifacts] were not made for the ritual of exhibition."³⁶ It was not certain that these objects would regain their sacred character once alienated from Georgian territory and exhibited in settings that did not befit their character.

Apocalyptic warnings were also given: "The icons have this function: they belongs to us and if they leave Georgia we will experience great misfortune and neither the president, nor America, nor NATO's weapons will be of any help ..."³⁷ The alienation of religious objects would somehow diminish the protection of Georgia from its enemies. The Georgians had been given the stewardship of this sacred collection and were protected thereby, so long as these items remained in their proper settings. If the artifacts were taken outside of these proper settings, the welfare of the Georgia people and territory could not be guaranteed.

The other incident during Shevardnadze's time was the announcement in September 2003 of an agreement between the government of Georgia and the Vatican; ostensibly a treaty between two sovereign states, but perceived as an agreement between Georgia and the Roman Catholic Church. Previously Shevardnadze and Ilia II had signed a Concordat between state and Church in October 2002 that guaranteed a more or less privileged position for the Orthodox Church within the territory of the Republic of Georgia. The proposed document was to have assured Roman Catholics of their position within Georgia.

The announcement of the agreement was met with a firestorm of criticism.³⁸ The Georgian Orthodox Church had not been consulted in this matter. This aroused their opposition first of all as they believed that their privileged position gave them a right to oversee all church-state relations. Further, the bogey of Roman Catholicism in post-Soviet space had become a convenient foil in many ways for skeptical discourse about the way in which religious freedoms were to be promulgated in Orthodox nations. Pope John Paul II had

³⁵ The exhibition booklet was published despite the eventual cancellation of the exhibition itself. Soltes, Ori Z., ed., *National Treasures of Georgia*. (London: Philip Wilson Publishers; Foundation for International Arts & Education, 1999). This book is filled with extraordinary illustrations of artifacts and their setting in Georgia. Sadly, the book's essays suffer from a heavy editing that distorted facts and chronologies after their authors had submitted their material.

³⁶ "Tu xatebi Sak'art'velos datoveben, didi ubedureba dagvatqdeba t'avts," [If the icons are taken from Georgia a great misfortune will ensue], *Sak'art'velo*. #16 (4-10 May 1990).

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ www.civil.ge, 29 Sept. 2003.

visited Georgia in November 1999 but had been given a restrained reception by the Orthodox.

Within the Republic of Georgia itself there are very few Catholics;³⁹ certainly not a sufficient number to cause the reaction that ensued when the agreement with Rome was published. Shevardnadze had known that the Orthodox Church would never have supported the agreement to begin with, and was perhaps hoping that it could slide by when announced. It was less than two months later that Shevardnadze resigned from office after the events of the Rose Revolution. The Patriarch urged the opposition to refrain from violence and offered to negotiate between parties, meanwhile expressing no support for the continuation of Shevardnadze in office.

With the accession of the American-educated and English-speaking Mixeil Saakashvili to the presidency of Georgia, the movement to "locate" Georgia in Europe and the West shifted into high gear. Two paragraphs of Saakashvili's inaugural address are illuminating as Georgia's "Europeanness" quickly becomes much more than just a metaphor; indeed it becomes policy.

Georgia is a country of unique culture; we are not only old Europeans but we are very old [or the oldest?] Europeans and, because of this Georgia holds a special place in European civilization. Georgia must become the model where every citizen will be equal before the law; where every citizen has equal opportunity to achieve success and to realize this by his/her own means. Georgia must become and will become a more free, educated, and proud homeland for [its] people. Georgia is the home for all Georgians, as well as for the representatives of ethnic groups that live in Georgia. All of Georgia's citizens: whether Russian, Abkhaz, Ossete, Azerbaijani, Armenian, Jewish, Greek, Ukrainian, Kurd for whom Georgia is their own homeland, are our nation's greatest treasure and wealth....

Georgia will be a stable partner with all of its friend-nations; Georgia must form, as a country with international responsibility, as a worthy member of international cooperation, as a country, which, despite its very complex geopolitical situation and location, to have good relations with all of its neighbors, and at the same time not to forget its own, proper and for centuries lost, its return to the European family, in European civilization. As a country with a very old Christian civilization, we should certainly return to this place. Our unshakeable course is European integration. It is time for Europe at last to consider and evaluate Georgia and to make steps in our direction and, for our part, we have the first real signs. It is not

³⁹ Some of these are a small group of Assyrian or Chaldean Catholics who desire to have a building set aside for worship in Tbilisi was met with demonstrations in the fall of 2006.

accidental that the European flag flies [here] today. This flag is also Georgia's flag, for the reason that it describes [literally, iconifies!] our civilization, our culture, our history, as well as our perspective and vision for the future.

Some of the items from these two paragraphs have become recurring themes during the two and a half years of the Saakashvili administration. First, the flags. The "European flag" to which Saakashvili refers is the flag of the European Union: a blue field with twelve gold stars. This flag flies along with the Georgian flag on every official building in Georgia, making it a nearly ubiquitous symbol of the European aspirations of the Republic of Georgia. In the context of flags as symbols it should be noted that the Georgian flag was changed with the Rose Revolution. Previously Georgia had flown the maroon, white, and gold flag of the short-lived republic; this flag had itself become a widespread symbol of freedom and independence for Georgians as Soviet power devolved in the late eighties and early nineties. The new flag for Georgia was the flag of Saakashvili's party, the National Movement, and it contains five red crosses (the center one larger than the other four) against a white field. This is the cross of St. George and is an explicitly Christian symbol in a nation that has for centuries included both Jews and Muslims.

The inaugural speech does make the Christian connection quite explicit and in "civilizational" terms. One is reminded here again of Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*. Despite the fact that Huntington makes a separate "civilization" for Orthodox Eastern Europe, Saakashvili may actually be moving Georgian identity in the direction of the Catholic/Protestant West. The shift by Saakashvili, although certainly not indicated as such, is significant.

The talk of civilizations is perhaps meant to be a bit vague at this point. The mention of Christianity as requisite for membership in the European civilization is to make us aware, of course, that Georgia is not "essentially" Muslim in its origins, despite having lived in the midst of the Islamic sphere of influence for many centuries and despite the fact that some parts of the Georgian population, for example those in Ajaria, have historically been Muslim.

Huntington mentioned the Christian/Muslim divide as important to defining the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict.⁴⁰ This would have been more true in 1850 than it is today. The majority of Muslim Abkhaz left the Russian Empire for the Ottoman Empire, especially after three events: the loss of Abkhazian autonomy in 1864, the rebellion of 1866, and after the

⁴⁰ Huntington, 278.

Russo-Turkish War on 1877-1878.⁴¹ Some of the remaining were Christians or converted to Christianity; many retained what have been described as pre-Christian beliefs and practices. Soviet rule, with its official atheism, was quite effective in suppressing religion in Abkhazia. There were no mosques and few operating churches in Abkhazia at the fall of the Soviet Union.

The purported divide between Islam and Christianity, however, is sometimes exploited. Abkhazian fighters in 1992-1993 were aided not only by Russians, but also by North Caucasian "brothers" – in a general ethnic sense, but also with the idea that such an alliance would strengthen the Muslim potential in Abkhazia. The latter did not happen – North Caucasian fighters in Abkhazia, such as Shamil Basayev, the late Chechen military leader, were disappointed at the lack of Islam's development in post-Soviet Abkhazia.

The Georgians have also played the religious card in this conflict. The late Tamaz Nadareishvili, who was head of the Abkhaz government-in-exile, went to Strasbourg in March 2002 to show pictures to officials of the Council of Europe, in order, he said, to show that Wahhabi fighters were present in Abkhazia.⁴²

The claim that Georgia, essentially through its Christianity, is a European nation must be further deconstructed. Christianity entered Georgian in the early fourth century,⁴³ quite likely as part of the same movement that brought Christianity north from Jerusalem, through Syrian and Armenian territories. Not until later in its Christian history did Georgia become more fully "European," if one may so denote Byzantine Imperial Christianity.

The policy of Saakashvili's government to promote Georgia's inclusion into Europe has meant Georgia's participation at the edge of a number of different European organizations, including the European Union, now having expanded to just across the Black Sea from Georgia with the inclusion of Romania and Bulgaria. The Georgians also have extensive relations with the OSCE and the Council of Europe.

Since April 2006 there has been a special cabinet minister who is in charge of relationships with Europe, the "Georgian State Minister for Questions of Integration into

⁴¹ Bežan Xorava, *Ap'xazt'a 1867 clis Muhajiroba*. [The Migration of Abkhaz in 1867] (T'bilisi: Gamomc'emloba Artanuji, 2004).

⁴² "Ap'xazet'ši Vahabitebis gaak'tiurebit' Evrosabčo šešp'ot'ebulia: šesazloa, Ap'xazet'ši al-Qaidas carmomadgenlebi imqop'ebian," [European Council troubled about Wahhabis in Abkhazia; it is possible that the representatives of al-Qaida are in Abkhazia] *Rezonansi*, #63, 9 Mar. 2002.

⁴³ Notwithstanding the received tradition of Apostolic visits from St. Andrew and St. Simon the Canaanite.

European and Euro-Atlantic Structures." The current occupant of this post in Giorgi Baramidze, one time Foreign Minister under Saakashvili.⁴⁴

One of the most important relationships that Georgia maintains is with NATO. Georgia's status in relationship to NATO has gradually been upgraded since its first contacts with NATO during the Shevardnadze government. This brings Georgia more closely into relationship with the United States and is among those relationships that brings up the question asked by some Georgians such as Gocha Gvasalia in his collection of essays called *P'ormac'ia da c'ivilizac'ia*.⁴⁵ Gvasalia discerns essential differences between Europe and the United States and particularly questions whether Georgia's enthusiastic support of the United States is in line with its desire to become a more integral part of Europe. He asks this question specifically in the context of US-European disagreements about the war in Iraq. As the "War on Terror" has progressed since then, and as one could make the argument that the United States has changed its perspective on international law and human rights, there is a question now as to whether Georgia can be so enthusiastically and simultaneously American and European in its outlook and alliances.

For its own part the Georgian Orthodox Church has met with a number of different challenges in the new period of Georgian independence. These challenges involve its relationship to the state, to society in general, and how it is able to contribute to the development of a newly imagined national narrative.

As already mentioned the Georgian Orthodox Church in some ways remained as a guarantor of a developing Georgian identity even before the modern period. Although it was made into an exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Georgian Church in the late imperial period, became more closely associated with developments of national identity. Orthodox seminaries in Georgian, especially in Tbilisi, came under suspicion for being hotbeds of nationalist sentiment. Language policy in the seminaries, and in the population at large, was among the many issues around which seminary students organized their thoughts and protests.

Although relations with the independent government of the Georgian Republic of 1918-1921 were sometimes strained the Georgian Orthodox Church was able to regain its self-governing status during that period of time. The government of the republic, however,

⁴⁴The position was created by Executive Decree #94, dated 11 May 2006; www.parliament.ge.

⁴⁵ Goč'a Gvasalia, *P'ormac'ia da c'ivilizac'ia*, (T'bilisi: "Universali", 2005).

with its socialist roots, was interested in the secularization of education and of other aspects of Georgian society.⁴⁶

The negotiations between church and state for influence in Georgia were, of course, cut short by the establishment of Soviet rule in February 1921. As in other parts of the Soviet Union, the official atheist policy of the Communist Party came to dominate. The Georgian Orthodox Church was stripped of much of its property and prestige during the 1920s and though some of its privileges were restored during and after World War II, it remained but a pale shadow of its former self.⁴⁷

The post-Soviet period for the Orthodox Church in Georgia began, to some extent, with the elevation of Ilia II to the patriarchal throne. By the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, many churches had been reopened, bishoprics had been restored, and a theological academy had been opened in Tbilisi. The physical recovery of the Georgian Church has accelerated since the re-establishment of Georgian independence, as dozens then hundreds of church structures have been reclaimed, repaired, rebuilt, and newly constructed. The largest undertaking of this sort is the recently completed Cathedral of the Holy Trinity. Dedicated in November 2004, this structure now dominates the skyline of Tbilisi in a way that the centuries-old Sioni Cathedral could never do.

Patriarch Ilia II, while maintaining that his priests may not be involved with the politics of Georgia, has always kept a significant profile in relation to the Georgian government. He has been present at important state occasions throughout the presidencies of Gamsaxurdia, Shevardnadze, and Saakashvili and not merely as a symbol of power with which to decorate podiums on festive occasions. Ilia has been successful in negotiating the Church's favorable position as mentioned in Article Nine of the Constitution of the Republic of Georgia. The constitutional reference to Orthodoxy's historical association with the Georgia nation is an important part of the way in which the Church has influenced the discourse on national identity.

The Concordat that was drawn up between church and state emphasizes the special and historical relationship that Orthodoxy has in Georgia. This agreement signed 14 October 2002 remains a foundational document in Georgian church-state relations and in the way

⁴⁶ Sergo Vardosanize, *Sak'art'velos Mart'lmadidebuli Samoc'ik'ulo Eklesia, 1918-1952 clebši*. [The Orthodox Apostolic Church of Georgia, 1918-1952] (T'bilisi: "Mec'niereba", 2001) 8-55.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 56-109.

Georgian national identity is officially defined. The Concordat expands on the aforementioned Article Nine of the Georgia Republic's Constitution.⁴⁸

This special relationship gives the Orthodox Church an upper hand in the discussion of how Orthodoxy fits into the narrative of national identity. It also gives the Georgian Church, at least from its own perspective, some notion that it is the national church. One of the ongoing issues in the post-Soviet period has been the way in which the Orthodox Church has participated in the oppression of various non-Orthodox denominations and sects. Baptists, Pentecostals, Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witness, Roman Catholics, and others have been subjected to varying degrees of harassment. The constitutional guarantees for the Orthodox Church have given some cover to officials who deny permits for church buildings.

One other area in which the Georgian Orthodox Church has entered the discussion in this context of defining Georgian national identity along its many "borders," is the discussion of "freedom," particularly as that freedom has been discussed as something that is "western" in its origin.

Ilia II's Christmas and Paschal letters have been important forums for his ideas about freedom. He recognizes Georgia's existence at a geographical crossroads and in his 2004 Christmas Letter (the first after the Rose Revolution) says the following, after declaring both totalitarianism and "excessive liberalism" to be unacceptable⁴⁹

We would, in any event, commit a serious error were we to mechanically take up the lifestyle of this or that nation. Georgia lies at the crossroads of east and west, north and south, and naturally is tempted by their influence, but our worth is exactly in that we preserve our own genuine faith national values, that we examine the experiences of others, and [in this way] we will do what is timely and necessary.

Nation-building is a long and difficult enterprise, even in the modern world of instant communication and web-accessed data bases. The break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 was essentially followed by an experiment in the building of new state institutions, as well in the creation of large bodies of new laws to govern the successor states that emerged. Old economic systems, with their political and legal foundations, were replaced by a variety of new systems.

⁴⁸ A commentary on the Concordat from the Georgian Orthodox Church's point of view is given in: Davit' Čikvaiže, *Sak'art'velos saxelmcip'osa da Sak'art'velos Samoc'ik'ulo Avtokep'alur Mart'Imadidebel Eklesias šoris Konstituc'iuri šet'anxmebis komentarebi*. [Commentary on the Constitutional Concordat between the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia and the Government of Georgia] (T'bilisi: 2005).

⁴⁹"Sašobao epistole Sruiliad Sak'art'velos Kat'olikos-Patriark'is, Ucmindesi da Unetaresi Ilia II," [Christmas Epistle of His Holiness and Beatitude, Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia Ilia II] *Sak'art'velos respublika*, 7 Jan. 2004.