

## RELIGION AND NATIONALISM IN GEORGIA

by **Paul Crego**

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Among the places in East Europe and the former Soviet Union where the weapons of the Cold War continue to be used is the Republic of Georgia. This small nation has been particularly buffeted about by the winds of war and civil strife. A massacre on Rustaveli Avenue in the capital city of T'bilisi on 9 April, 1989 marked the beginning of the end of Soviet rule.

Parliamentary elections in October 1990 and presidential elections in May 1991 were followed by interethnic strife in Ossetian territories and by internecine turmoil that led in several short months to the ouster and exile of Zviad Gamsaxurdia in January of 1992, only seven months after the voters had chosen him president with nearly 86% of the vote.

As in other former Soviet republics a former Communist Party leader came to power: Eduard Shevardnadze, known in the West for his dramatic resignation and warning to the Gorbachev government in December 1990. Shevardnadze's rule has also been quite troubled: the Ap'xas (Abkhaz) have effectively seceded and have done what ethnic cleansing they could of their territory along the Black Sea coast and Mr. Gamsaxurdia has appeared from his stronghold in Samegrelo to threaten Shevardnadze and his regime. Only with the help of the Russians, recently blamed for assisting the Abkhaz, has Shevardnadze managed to cling to power for the time being.

In all of this civil chaos and interethnic strife what can there be said for the role of religion? As the Georgians have begun to redevelop their independent political culture at the end of the twentieth century and as their national identity is defined and refined, we find that there is much discussion about the role of religion. This takes place in relation to political and ethnic issues in Georgia and is consistent with the ideology of Georgian dissidents during the last decades of Soviet rule. I want, in this paper, especially to focus on the writings and speeches of Zviad Gamsaxurdia, deposed president and now rebel. He had, and undoubtedly still has, a theocratic program for the Georgian people and other residents of the Georgian republic. While a dissident he was concerned with the spiritual health of the nation and with the state of the Georgian Orthodox Church. As political leader in 1990-1991, while making some attempts to soothe the fears of non-Georgians and non-Muslims, it is clear that Georgian national identity, as he understood it, included Orthodox Christianity. This, I believe, is one of the many factors which has intensified the several battles being fought in Georgia today.

The development of Georgian identity is in line with the following statement of Anthony D. Smith in his The Ethnic Origin of Nations:

Among religiously inspired communal 'myth-symbol complexes' and their cultures, we find repeated movements of cultural renewal in the face of external threats or inner divisions, which revitalise the sources of their communal energy and cultural power. Taking the ideal community as their focus and concern, sacral *mythomoteurs* and their cultures inject a popular, dynamic element into communal consciousness which is lacking in the more dynastic or even political kinds of 'myth-symbol complexes.' By locating the ideal community in a specific place and archaic time, the religious 'myth-symbol complex' gives the members of the *ethnie* a sense of destiny which stems from a transcending historical perspective beyond immediate events and vicissitudes. That allows oppressed *ethnie* sustained by sacral *mythomoteurs* to entertain hope of a 'status reversal' by which they will be restored to their former state of grace.

Some background is first necessary. The emergence and coalescing of the Georgian nation at the end of antiquity is intertwined with the conversion of the Georgian people to Christianity. The evangelization of the Georgians around the capital city of Mc'xet'a (Metchheta) in the fourth century by St. Nino and her community was reinforced by the creation of an alphabet and written language in the fifth. As with their neighbors, the Armenians, this language became a vehicle for the transmission of Holy Scripture, the divine liturgy, and other such material as theology, sermons, and hagiography -- original as well as in translation. From the beginning the written Georgian language was a sacralizing feature of the Georgian national culture. The Georgian lands came to be defined as those territories on which the divine liturgy was sung in the Georgian tongue.

For a time in the eleventh and twelfth centuries the Georgian people enjoyed a period of independence. For most of its history, however, the Georgian nation survived only within the sphere of one Muslim empire or another: Arab Muslims, Savafid Persians, and Ottoman and Seljuk Turks each held Georgian territory for significant amounts of time. The phenomenon of Muslim overlordship served to strengthen the connection between Georgian and Christian identities. Language, religion, and national identity were woven into one cultural cloth. The Georgian nation survived as a distinct entity as defined over against Islam, and, in this way, shares characteristics with other Christian peoples of the Middle East. Religion also defines the Georgians vis-à-vis Georgian-Armenian relations has been marked by the Armenian church's rejection of Chalcedon and subsequent ecumenical councils. This history supports the uniqueness of the Armenian church, on the one hand, and makes it possible for the Georgians, on the other, to develop a sense of their own identity as the only truly Orthodox Christian nation of Transcaucasia.

More to the point of developments in the late twentieth century is the rise of Georgian nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This nationalism was a mixture of various phenomena, including post-Enlightenment secular nationalism, linguocentric literacy campaigns, and some intentional Christian national ideology. It is ironic that socialists of a sort were in charge of the independent republic of Georgia from 1918 to 1921. Their nationalism was colored by their assumption that socialism would obviate the need for nationalism and independent states.

Before and after that time of independence, however, there were some, including the poet Ilia Cavcavadze, who spoke of Georgian national identity in its Christian terms. He, for example, wrote:

Christianity, in addition to the teaching of Christ, means among us the entire Georgian territory; it means *k'art'veloba* ["Georgian-ness"]. Today, as well, in all of Transcaucasia, Georgian and Christian mean one and the same thing. To convert to Christianity -- is to become Georgian.

It was this concept that survived into the Soviet period to become an inspiration for the nationalist dissidents of the seventies and eighties of this century. This quote from Cavcava'ze appeared in a small religious journal called The Raising of Lazarus, available at a newspaper kiosk in T'bilisi in July 1990. The Georgian Church, in harmony with the nationalists at this point, has recognized Cavcavadze as St. Ilia the Just and one can find his icon close by the iconostasis in the Sioni Cathedral in T'bilisi.

Representative of this thread of nationalism is Zviad Gamsaxurdia, son of the great writer and poet, Konstantine Gamsaxurdia. His writings and speeches, both as dissident and as leader of the Georgian nation show a mix of religion and nationalism which draws upon Georgian antiquity and the development of Georgian national identity to include Orthodox Christianity. Gamsaxurdia and his colleagues have used Ilia Cavcavadze as an icon of national identity and their particular type of political culture. As the name of the above-mentioned journal indicates, they have also used the character of Lazarus whose raising from the dead just before the events of Jesus' passion in the Gospel of John symbolizes Georgia's own resurrection among the nations of the world. Gamsaxurdia's idiosyncratic interpretation of John 11 (identifying Lazarus with the Beloved Disciple and with the Apostle and Evangelist, John, is tied in with the notion that Georgia is under special protection of the Theotokos). From the title page of his book, *Sakart'velos sulieri missia* [Georgia's Spiritual Mission] one can read the following:

The Georgian language is the Lazarus among languages; it is a primordial language, a principal language, even as Lazarus--John was the principal apostle of Jesus Christ, the disciple whom Jesus loved and who was his closest spiritual friend. He, at the same time, was adopted as a son by the Theotokos, just as Georgia is the 'lot' of the Theotokos.

Gamsaxurdia's long career as national dissident began in his days as a university student in the fifties. The crackdowns of the later Brezhnev era in the late seventies included Gamsaxurdia's arrest and imprisonment in 1978. A recantation, however, led to his release in 1979. He was also imprisoned and exiled for some time in the eighties.

As Gamsaxurdia, with the late Merab Kost'ava and others continued to arouse support for the cause of the Georgian national renaissance, they took on the Georgian Orthodox Church as one of their projects. Gamsaxurdia explicitly called for spiritual renewal as part of his program for national revival and saw the sorry state of the Georgian church as an object of criticism.

In *samizdat* documents Gamsaxurdia addressed the situation of the Georgian hierarchy. The history of the Georgian Church in the Soviet period is much more grim than that of its Russian sibling to the north. It was understood both as the upholder of the old regime and as a potent icon at the center of Georgian national identity. It was, therefore, severely persecuted during the Soviet period. And this was merely insult added to injury: for the loss of the Georgian Church's autocephaly from 1811-1918 had included forced Russification (including the replacement of Georgian letters with Cyrillic on the frescoes of churches) and the general neglect of church structures.

The phenomenon of 'red clergy' was attacked by Gamsaxurdia and his dissident compatriots as the reason behind gross corruption in the church. Indeed, several unsavory characters found their way into high positions, especially during the patriarchate of the inept David V. In a 1974 document which appeared under the title, "On the Situation of the Orthodox Church in Georgia," the following accusations were made:

It is true that homosexuality has reached the highest ecclesial ranks (bishops and metropolitans) which, as is known, must observe celibacy (i.e. must not be married). As concerns the common ecclesial ranks -- priest and deacons -- for them it is sufficient to pay a specified sum and to be politically obedient.

The secret cult of homosexuality is a completely understandable phenomenon. First, the government is able to keep such people under strict submission and the slightest insubordination to convict and hold them criminally liable. Second, the increasing number of homosexuals among the clergy -- is a remarkable method of discrediting the church, and religion in general.

One of the individuals covered under these and other allegations, Metropolitan Gaioz, was eventually imprisoned for theft in 1979. Gamsaxurdia and others pointed out that the KGB intentionally infiltrated the ranks of the Georgian clergy in order to discredit the church. Even during the years of Ilia II Siolasvili, the current patriarch, the church has continued to come under attack, as in a 1982 letter, authored by Gamsaxurdia, and appearing under the title, "An Open Letter to the Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia, Ilia II."

As the Georgians moved toward independence in 1989-1990, it became increasingly clear that Gamsaxurdia would become the first leader of a free Georgia. This was especially so after the untimely death of Merab Kostava in a car accident in 1989. Georgia like the Baltic nations to the North were well down the road to independence before the final collapse of Gorbachev's Soviet Union in December of 1989. It is ironic that Gamsaxurdia was being driven out of Tbilisi even as the USSR finally crumbled.

In the fall of 1990, parliamentary elections resulted in the coming to power of Gamsaxurdia's "Round Table" coalition. From that time on, through the Spring 1991 presidential elections, and until the beginning of 1992 Gamsaxurdia was the head of state. The newspaper *Sak'art'velos respublika* [The Republic of Georgia], the successor to the daily Communist party newspaper, became the official organ of government power.

Several trends showed the explicit Christian agenda of the government. The newspaper frequently carried front page articles about religious holidays. The following, for example, is from an article about the celebration of Easter:

All of Georgia observed this year's [Feast of the] Resurrection freely, openly, and in charity, and publicly they prayed on this day for the Christian community. On the 28th of October, by the great grace of Christ, the will of the people was victorious and the republic's newly elected government gave to all the right, without fear, to enter church, to light a candle for the homeland, to pray for it, for the purification of its soul, and for the salvation of the people.

Our National Supreme Council sees clearly the harmonious relationship between Christianity and the government and the union of the Church and the people. This year, for the first time, the second day of Easter -- a day for remembering the dead -- was proclaimed a holiday by the National Parliament and this gave us the opportunity to go to the cemeteries for the purpose of remembering the souls of the dead and to pay honor to the deceased.

Other religious festivals were proclaimed national holidays. Saints of the Georgian Orthodox Church were given prominent coverage, especially those with political roles, such as the ruler Davit' the Builder, who had unified Georgia politically in the eleventh century, while fighting various Muslim empires. The Christmas and Paschal letters of the Patriarch were included in full.

These trends, often connected personally with the person of Zviad Gamsaxurdia, find a certain climax in his inaugural speech of 6 June 1991. Here he speaks of the relation of the Georgian church and the state and of Georgia as the "lot" of the Theotokos.

About midway through the speech, the newly-elected President Gamsaxurdia turns to the subject of church-state relations: "In Georgia, as in an Orthodox Christian country the union [*kavsiri*] between church and the government is traditional." This is further defined by what follows immediately: "The living faith of the Georgians has defined in the midst of inimical surroundings the many-centuried existence of the Georgian state. The state, on the other hand, for its part, in every way gave assistance to the apostolic activity of the church."

This union is described by Gamsaxurdia as between church and the state [*saxelmcip'o*], making the relationship a very concrete one between two institutions and not merely a concept that belongs to some abstract notion of the Georgian people and their religiousity.

Gamsaxurdia contined: "The rebirth of the Georgian state, the resurrection of its independence, cannot succeed apart from the rebirth of a significant living faith, outside of a moral rebirth. Both Georgia's past and present support this." It is clear enough here and quite clear at the end of the speech that Gamsaxurdia is not speaking of some general increase in the religious and moral character of the Georgian people but rather the

establishment of Orthodoxy as the normative faith of society and partner of some sort with the Georgian state.

More telling about Gamsaxurdia's own movement and how that movement wanted to become the ruling force in Georgia, Gamsaxurdia said,

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.

Then, after some indication that this does not mean interference in each other's affairs, Gamsaxurdia concluded, "Together with the resurrection of the state's independence Orthodoxy will become the state religion." This includes, as Gamsaxurdia went on to say, financial support for the establishment of the church. After all of this the new president's words about freedom of conscience sound quite different from what would be understood in the United States.

One might, at this point, think of the established churches of Northwest Europe and their relative benignity. But, in contrast, Georgia is part of that group of nations in the Middle East and Eastern Europe in which language, religious affiliation, one's national identity and political culture tend to be inextricably intertwined. It is the phenomenon of the Caesars - Diocletian, as well as Justinian, who believed that the unity of religious cult would be the foundation of a political unified and strong empire. It is the phenomenon of Muslim political culture which, radiating from the cities of Arabia, unites the House of Islam with a sense of political oneness (at least in theory). It is the phenomenon of Christians living in the House of Islam. Ethno-religious minorities (Georgians, for example, as well as Coptic Christians in Egypt) lived on as separate and second-class political entities.

The declaration of church-state union by Gamsaxurdia is therefore not a benign sense of ecclesial establishment but a very sharp definition of who can be Georgian and who can attain to the full rights as citizens of the Georgian state. It is not for no reason that the answer to the question "*K'artveli xar?*" [Are you a Georgian?] can be "*Ara, musulmani var.*" [No, I am a Muslim].

The concluding paragraph of Gamsaxurdia is very explicitly Christian in its language:

Ladies and gentlemen!

The Georgian people is chosen among its equals for its lifestyle, location, and language. Georgia is the "lot" of the Theotokos.

The naming of Georgia as the "lot" of the Theotokos refers to the time of Pentecost in the early church. In an article in the third issue of 1989 of the patriarch's journal *Jvari vazisa* [Cross of the Grapevine] the explanation is given that Mary and some of the Apostles were speaking Georgian during the events described in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. When the Apostles divided up the world for evangelization, the Virgin Mary drew Georgia's "lot." Being near death, however, her task was passed to Andrew and to Simon the Canaanite. She continued, however, even after her death, to have a special vocation to protect the Christian Georgians.

Gamsaxurdia continued:

Our history, the foundation of our life, is a struggle for faith, for national independence. This is a martyr's and Christ-given way of goodness, compassion, and love. History has given us the possibility to return to our ancestral path, to confess in faith a free Georgia. The time has come when the life of all without exception belongs to the fatherland; the people are, without a doubt, prepared for the decisive battle. National government is a duty, it is a worthy and great mission; may the task before us be fulfilled. May Georgia return to its rightful place in the commonwealth of nations. Such great purposes can only be accomplished with divine love. May the will of God be fulfilled! The will of the people! Long live free Georgia! May God protect us all!

I believe that the explicit Christian agenda put forward by Zviad Gamsaxurdia during his years as dissident and during the months of his presidency are part of the fuel that was added to the fires of turmoil in Georgia. Especially after hearing Gamsaxurdia's speech, members of ethno-religious minorities would feel less than fully welcome at Gamsaxurdia's "Round Table." It has not been surprising that ethnic and political battles in Transcaucasia have taken on a certain ferocity as they are mixed, from both sides to some extent, with some amount of religious fervor.

This is not to say that religion is the only motivation at work in Georgia. Xenophobia, prejudice, imperial intrigue, and greed can be found on all sides and none is based on any sort of religious ideology. What I do want to say is that religion cannot be dismissed, especially insofar as the Georgians identify themselves as the one Orthodox Christian nation.