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De-secularizing national space in Georgia¹

Construction of a new presidential palace on the model of the White House, erection of new buildings; conversion of the old city of Signaghi into a Disney Land style Potemkin village; replacement of city centre oriental "bazaars" by Western style shopping malls: Georgia is under construction. The direct involvement of the public authorities in the landscaped drawing constitutes a well anchored tradition. Sufficient to remind the statues of Lenin, propaganda posters, or the folklorisation of the city through the restoration of "Old Tbilisi" in late Soviet time to understand that issues at stakes in transforming the urban cityscape are not only economic (real estate speculation, etc..) but also highly political: it aims at erasing the traces of the Soviet past and at making visible the governmental program of modernization, including in its rationalist and hygienist dimension, and rapprochement with the West. Space has not to be understood only in a geographic conception. Pierre Nora reminds that the word « space » is torn between two poles of meaning, history and geography: in one respect, it refers to a territory, limited by borders inside which the power is exercised, in another to nature, these two poles being indissolubly connected in the definition of French national identity². Numerous studies have indeed scrutinized the process by which space is invested by the forms of power and have analysed the link between the appropriation of space and nation building.

In post-Soviet Georgia, the State is not the only institution to shape the landscape. A parallel trend can be observed: the saturation of public space by religious symbols. Therefore interventions designed to mark the territory are a good observing point to investigate the rationale of social and political restructuring of relations between Church and State, of the overlapping between political and religious spheres and beyond, to understand the new polarization of the political arena.

A first section will investigate how churches draw the outlines of a soft territory, slightly different from the national territory. Then we will study the impact of landscape transformation by the Orthodox Church of Georgia (OCG) on the conception and policy of cultural heritage. The last section will be dedicated to the process contributing to the encroachment on State prerogatives.

The soft territory of Orthodoxy

Repentance, T. Abouladze's perestroika film ended with the following line: "And what a road is needed for, if it does not lead to the temple?" Such a replica would be appropriate now: in 2010 Georgia, any road leads to a church. As noted by Paul Manning, more churches were built in Georgia during the last twenty years than in previous centuries³.

In Soviet times, as public practice was banned, the defense of national identity has helped the Church to ensure its survival. In the 1980s, the national Church has been a place of cultural resistance, while religious activities had declined. The collapse of the Soviet Union has created a new context that changes the relationship between national identity and orthodoxy: on one hand, the function of the nationalist discourse has changed with the existence of an independent State- which is now to shape the future of the nation-, on the other hand, persecution of religious practices has ceased, religion is no longer relegated to the private sphere or confined to the embodiment of a secular idea of the Nation. As in many other

contexts, the "return of God" is manifest in its public staging: people crossing themselves passing a church -a new choreography of everyday life -, fasting - in a context where table manners are so constitutive of the modern national identity-⁴, wearing crosses and other distinctive signs, participating in processions and pilgrimages, attending major ritual ceremonies, etc. Those who used to denounce the anti-religious persecution regret the "ostentatious" feature of the new religiosity, condemn the "superficiality", lack of spirituality of the new believers and question their faith.

This ostentation of orthodoxy cannot be understood only as the natural and spontaneous irruption of a religion, too long confined to privacy, into a hypothetical public sphere: it is mainly the result of a political will and of strategies aiming at re-defining the link between religion and national identity and at labeling the territory as a part of Orthodox Christendom. Building new churches is part of this strategy, since the motivation is not only to open new places of worship, but also to create a landscape reflecting the congruence of religion and national identity.

Orthodox churches as markers of the national territory

For the Orthodox Church of Georgia, such a labeling of the national territory requires that Orthodoxy is granted the monopoly over public visibility, including by building churches. The place to choose is crucial. Often built on a hill, the churches are used to display the Christian essence of the Georgian land. They pertain to the same register as the bright crosses that line now major roads and contribute to the saturation of public space by markers of orthodoxy. In Varketili, when parishioners asked for a plot for the new church of the Virgin of Iberia, they were not happy with the land granted by the municipality because, aside the main road, it was not noticeable enough. Therefore, some parishioners tried to negotiate with the representatives of state authorities a more visible location in the middle of the road, and although City departments have not given their permission, that is where the church was finally built⁵.

The issue is particularly important in areas where part of the population is not orthodox. Even when there are no parishioners, churches should be built, sometimes in hardly accessible places, or reopened for worship: whoever lives there, one has to know this is the Christian land of Georgia. Several churches were hence built in Kvemo Kartli, in Marneuli for example, a cross was erected near the Red Bridge. In Adjara, 14 new churches have been erected, some of them visible only from the Turkish territory. In the border village of Sarpi, several are under construction, whereas a mosque stands on the other side of the border line. Churches double the border devices, they are designed to mark the entry not only on the Georgian territory, but beyond that on the territory "of Christendom" (interview with an architect, August 2008).

While Muslim Georgians were encouraged to rediscover their "true faith", in minority populated regions, rather than mass conversion, the Church top priority was reopening Orthodox churches and reviving historical dioceses. In the 1990s, in Javakheti, incidents occurred with the Armenian population during a visit of the Catholicos Patriarch in Poka, on the Lake Paravani. Later the opening of a convent had also led to some discontent among the local population⁶. Other incidents broke out in spring 2004 in Kvemo Kartli⁷, and once more in Javakheti, when a Mass was celebrated in Kumurdo, in a church considered by the local population to belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church and the police was sent to prevent ethnic clashes⁸. In this last case, top politicians came in order to attend the Mass. The reconquest of lost territories of Orthodoxy was on the agenda of the Church, a process seen as parallel to State building and to regaining sovereignty over the national territory.

Nevertheless, Church boundaries are not State borders, the canonical territory encroaches on neighbor States. The Armenian Apostolic Church had protested against the decision taken by

the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church of Georgia on February 6, 2006 to restore one of the "historic dioceses" on the north of Armenia and to create the diocese of Dmanisi and Agarak Tashir⁹. In December 2008, in a context of strong tensions over the Armenian churches in Georgia groups of Orthodox activists close to the Church held a rally outside the Ministry of Culture and in front of the Armenian embassy to demand the transfer under the jurisdiction of the Church of churches and Orthodox monasteries located in the Armenian region of Lore-Tachir¹⁰. Churches and monasteries located in Turkish territory are also the subject of intense attention, and dioceses were restored there (Diocese of Batumi and *Lazeti*; Diocese Akhaltikhe and *Tao-Klarjeti*)¹¹.

While the process of state building requested a national territory with well defined borders, the churches sketch an imagined "soft" territory that reminds the Georgian Kingdom at its maximum expansion, between 10th and 13th century goes, but that goes beyond the territory of modern Georgia.

The exclusion of orthodox places of worship

Building orthodox churches is not sufficient to label the territory. Preventing building non-orthodox places of worship is also required. Controversies about the visibility of minority religions are not peculiar to Georgia, as recently illustrated by controversies that arose in several European countries. In order to ensure its hegemony over the public space, the Patriarchate on the one hand, has raised obstacles to open new places of worship of other faiths, and secondly, attempts to turn the churches of non-Orthodox Christians into orthodox churches.

All faiths have faced considerable difficulties in constructing new buildings, and only a handful of non-Patriarchate places of worship have being openly built without problems. *A priori*, "traditional religions" (a category which continues to influence the management of cults although it is not legally based) are better off, but the situations are highly differentiated depending of regions and the weight of the confessions involved. In Ajara, for example, mosques open in villages where most of the inhabitants are Muslims, while some have publicly expressed difficulties encountered in villages, where the Orthodox are a significant proportion of the population¹². The situation is even more critical in Samtskhe-Javakheti, where the Meskhetians have weaker institutions to protect them in comparison with their Ajaran coreligionists¹³. They have complained of the destruction and degradation of mosques or attacks upon them¹⁴. Even in Kvemo Kartli, where the Sunni Azeris constitute a substantial part of the population, there have been problems. The Union of Orthodox parishioners has organized a demonstration against the opening of a mosque in Nizhnyi Bolnisi.

Catholic, Armenian Churches and some Protestant denominations are facing difficulties in obtaining permission to build new churches because of pressures from the Patriarchate. Even if attacks against minority religions have decreased after the "Rose Revolution", some communities are victims of violence when they try to open places of worship. This was the case in 2005 when a Baptist community was attacked when trying to build a church in Zestafoni¹⁵.

Organizations that have managed to open a place of worship have sought to be secretive. For example, a Pentecostal congregation has bought a building to turn into its offices, planning to later turn part of it into a sanctuary¹⁶. The Jehovah's Witnesses have been able to build Kingdom Halls across Georgia in the last few years but have been careful, refraining from placing signs outside their places of worship and trying not to attract attention¹⁷. In 2006, Bishop Pasotto complained that in recent years all the Catholic Church has been able to build its "tiny places of worship in out of the way villages"¹⁸.

A new "screaming stones" dispute

In order to mark the territory by the orthodoxy, the Church tries not only to restrict the construction of non-orthodox places of worship, but also to appropriate old buildings of other Christian denominations, that is to say primarily the Catholic and Armenian churches¹⁹, reviving the old controversy about the "screaming stones"²⁰. Again, the challenge is twofold: to impede the practice of other faiths²¹, and more crucially, to prevent any public visibility.

Six Catholic churches in major towns – the port of Batumi, Kutaisi, Gori, Ivliita, Ude and Akhaltsikhe - were given to the Orthodox Church and have not been returned²². Ivliita church, built in 1298, one of the oldest Catholic churches in Georgia, could not operate due to the absence of Catholic priests. The Catholic community of the village then invited an Orthodox priest who was to deliver the Catholic mass. Instead, it has been transformed into an orthodox church. In 2003, Theodore, the Orthodox Archbishop of Akhalitsikhe, Tao-Klarjeti Lazeti has prevented the arrival of the appointed Catholic priest²³.

The issue of Armenian churches led to significant tensions between the Orthodox Church of Georgia and the Armenian Apostolic Church and, by extension, between the two states. The most virulent polemic has focused on five churches in Tbilisi and one in Akhaltsikhe, all closed to worship and claimed by the Orthodox Church of Georgia, who argues that they were built on the foundations of Georgian churches.

The existing tension since the early 1990s, rose in 2008 when Father Tariel, the priest of the church of the Cross, neighboring Norashen, decided to carry out work in order to turn it into an Orthodox church²⁴. In the Georgian press, some articles deny that the church has been Armenian while some experts attempt to demonstrate the soundness of the Georgian claims²⁵. The architectural elements, because they play a crucial role in national identity, must be displayed if orthodox or otherwise destroyed. In Norashen, the discontent was provoked by the removal of two *khachkars* and, more recently, the enclosing of the church with a concrete fence, the defacing of Armenian inscriptions on tombstones, and the bringing in of Georgian tombstone. In Catholic churches too, the distinguishing marks were destroyed. In Ivliita, the altar was smashed and the graves of French missionaries cemented²⁶. Catholic frescoes and inscriptions of the 18th century were damaged during restoring work supervised by Orthodox priests in Ivliita and Gori²⁷ and the icon of the Virgin Mary disappeared in Gori.

The de-secularization of national Heritage

The action taken to modify the landscape illustrates a specific conception of the national territory, which mixes elements of legitimacy based on nationalist references and elements of religious legitimacy. But the relationship is reversed compared to the 19th century debates on the "screaming stones": the Orthodox churches do not serve anymore to "prove" the Georgianness of the territory, but on the contrary, the territory being Georgian; it has to be displayed as Orthodox²⁸.

The Catholicos Patriarch, in his Nativity Epistle explicitly defined the dual sacredness of the national territory:

“Homeland is a place that God grants to man on the earth. Certainly, Homeland is a marked territory with its nature, natural resources, flora and fauna. But, Homeland is far more ... the Homeland is a piece of land enriched with your blood ancestors. It is air enriched with your tongue. It is air enriched with your tongue. It is environment enriched with your gene, your

nature. It is a piece of space keeping the whole history of your country and nation [...]. Its value greatly depends on number of saints praying for the nation before God. No nation shall compare with Georgians in that. Georgia has always had great heroes sacrificing their lives to Homeland”²⁹.

Homeland is formed by glorious past and contemporary fervor together. Encouraged by the recognition in the 1995 Constitution and in 2002 constitutional agreement (see below) of its "special role", the Church has always emphasized the fact that it embodied the history of Nation. This allows it to claim its hegemony over the heritage of the past. But the very concept of heritage becomes ambiguous when mobilized by religious actors. It results in hybridization between the inherently secular elements who founded it (preservation of the artistic value of the vestiges of the past) and elements of sanctification by Orthodoxy.

The transformation of National Heritage

Historically, for many Georgians, the protection of National heritage was the path that led to religion. As soon as anti-religious policies began to weaken, the issue of reopening churches and of the preservation of religious heritage raised together. Since the 1970s, the revival of the Orthodox Church of Georgia and of religious practice was closely linked to the protection of cultural heritage. The "national movement" (*erovnuli modzraoba*) mobilized around the defense of national heritage, while the republican authorities reacted by organizing programs for the protection and restoration of religious architecture. As in other Soviet republics, groups of young volunteers restored historic buildings; intellectuals drew attention to their deterioration or to poor restoration work³⁰. In the 1970s and 1980s, the republican authorities had substantial resources for heritage preservation and a significant autonomy of action. E. Shevardnadze, then First Secretary of CP of Georgia, sought to cut the grass under the feet of nationalist demands by facilitating restoration programs. He even sent the dissident T. Chkheidze, just out of prison, to join the team responsible for the restoration of David Garejji monasteries, then damaged by Soviet Army trainings³¹.

Many believers have come into the bosom of the Church from concern about the preservation of cultural and historical heritage, such as those young volunteers who participated in the renovation of churches and monasteries in the late 1980s³² or such as some priests. For example, the priest of the church of St Nicoloz, in Krtsanisi, is an architect by training, and he wrote his thesis on urban heritage. His first parishioners were young people who had contributed to its restoration and become practitioners through activities linked with the defense of cultural heritage. No wonder that this is the parish attended by the chief architect of the Orthodox Church of Georgia.

Since the heritage issue was put on the political agenda by activists of the national movement, Orthodox religious heritage has been more heavily invested by political actors than other parts of it. The pre-Christian heritage remains a matter for specialists, while the modern heritage (art nouveau paintings of the early XX century, etc.) is very marginal and the preservation of industrial and Soviet heritage had never been on the agenda. But, if during the Soviet era, religion was integrated into the narrative of the glorious past of the nation, from the mid-1990s, the attempt by the Church to capture the national heritage reinforces its reduction to its Orthodox dimension. However, a new trend has emerged in recent years, which put into question the secularized conception of cultural heritage.

Heritage protection policy

The Orthodox Church of Georgia no longer contents with claiming a right of user or a property right, but it influences the very definition of what is to be considered as their heritage. It claims its legitimacy to assert its monopoly and control over the procedures of sacralisation of public places, anchored in specific architectural norms and in religious practice. Insofar, the Church competes with the state on defining the heritage policy, especially with the Ministry of Culture.

The hybrid conception of cultural heritage has an impact on the way the Orthodox Church of Georgia shapes the public space. In order to remind the Orthodox identity of the national territory, churches have to conform to the collective representation of what should be a Georgian church. They should not necessarily be ancient churches (as in the logic of cultural heritage), but they must look as if they were ancient³³. The buildings must comply with a national architecture, which is not anymore only a testimony of the past, since the collective memory is mainly activated by the religious practice. Hence, the Orthodox Church has imposed an architectural style for all new churches, now the majority of churches opened for worship. The plans must be approved by the competent department of the Patriarchate, the Center for Architecture, Restoration and Arts of the Patriarchy of Georgia, which is very meticulous about the compliance of new construction with the standards of medieval architecture.

The past has been de-secularized: ancient churches are not seen as vestige of Middle-Age architecture. The aesthetic and historical value of ancient buildings makes sense only if those are reopened to worship³⁴, as illustrated by the confrontation between the Orthodox Church of Georgia and the Ministry of Culture in 2008. The Ministry of Culture had successfully negotiated an agreement with the Ministry of Culture of Turkey about the reconstruction of some architectural religious complex in Turkey, in a bad condition and endangered. However, the Patriarchate has rejected the terms of the agreement (i.e. the restoration by Georgians of Oshki, Ishkani and Khandzta and the restoration by Turkish Medresse to Akhaltsikhe as well as the reconstruction of the Aziz mosque in Batumi, not even as a place of worship and, moreover, in the outskirts of the city) and has pressured the Minister to break the agreement (interviews at the Ministry of Culture, August 2008). Some ancient churches are entirely rebuilt, like the Church of the Assumption of the Virgin, which dates from the 8th century, in Dighomi, erected "in the style of the ancient basilicas, with decorations that reproduce those churches and Oshki Pakhal in Tao-Klarjeti"³⁵.

The restoration of old buildings has hence become a controversial issue. Conflicts have recently emerged between the Church and scholars of medieval architecture. In some cases, conservators have been critical about restoration work undertaken under the auspices of the Patriarchate, for example in the case of the Atenis Zion Church, near Gori. These debates are particularly sharp when it comes to buildings listed by UNESCO as part of the world heritage, as it is the case since 1994 with the cathedral at Svetitskhoveli, Djvari or Bagrati church near Kutaisi. Because of inappropriate work in the vicinity of the complex, Mskheta was put on the list of heritage in danger in 2009³⁶. Reconstruction work was suspended in Bagrati in autumn 2009 after experts have denounced the materials used in restoration work, and in prevision of a planned UNESCO led mission. In both cases, the Patriarchate would like to establish a joint committee with representatives of the authorities, the Patriarchate and experts from UNESCO³⁷.

While Mskheta was inscribed on the list of world heritage in danger, a public controversy arose over a presidential development project of the site. During the first parliamentary session of 2010, the leader of the Christian Democrat Georgy Targamadze protests against the project to install a beach at the intersection of Aragvi and Kura, "many citizens of Georgia can hardly

imagine a beach and swimwear in this sacred place located on a pilgrimage route for Georgia, but also for the entire Orthodox world³⁸. He thinks that any development of Mskheta must be done in consultation with the Patriarchate. The leader of the oppositional party “Georgian Troupe” (Kartuli dasi) Jondi Bagaturia declared “that Mskheta being the religious capital of Georgia, and Svetitskhoveli Cathedral its center, [...] the development of beach on this site was totally unacceptable”.

Claims to shape a cityscape according to religious-based conceptions are not new. The priest who officiates in the church of St-Nicolas mentioned above, in Krtsanisi, launched a petition to prevent the construction of a hotel complex on the site of Krtsanisi battlefield near the church. The past and the sacred interweave and shape the memorial policy conducted by the Church³⁹, a policy aiming at converting memorials in holy places.

These examples indicate that shaping public space by Orthodoxy goes beyond the building of new churches. The Patriarchate indeed claims an influence over the entire national territory. Disputes have risen due to attempts by priests to appropriate ownership of lands neighboring the churches. Privatization of land adjoining Svetitskhoveli cathedral was one of the reasons for inscribing it on the list of monument in danger⁴⁰. In town as well as in the countryside, numerous non religious buildings or lands have been given to the Church, for example, forests in Kakheti, in Akhaltsikhe to Borjomi, Bakuriani⁴¹.

The policy of turning national space into an Orthodox space meets strong support from large segments of the population and cannot be solely attributed to the action of the Orthodox Church of Georgia. On the contrary, as seen above, the Patriarchate is also responding to a demand from below and social actors encouraging the orthodox “branding” of the national landscape are heterogeneous: they may be politicians eager to capitalize on the Church popularity, priests, but also believers or “patriots” for whom the appropriation of the new national space occurs through its merging with the religious space. Constructing a new church is usually an individual initiative, only *subsequently* validated by the Church. Groups involved in the transformation of churches of other denominations in Orthodox churches, even if they are manipulated by the Patriarchate, act with some autonomy. This was also the case of ultra-Orthodox groups who used to attack minority religions (the attitude of the Church toward extremist activists was ambiguous). Disputes about Catholic and Armenian churches and the destruction of non-Orthodox heritage arouse little reaction in the Georgian society: the religious uniformity of the urban landscape is not seen as a problem and is even broadly welcome.

Claims of the Church go beyond a sole *droit de regard* over religious heritage protection policy: it asserts its legitimacy to intervene in all decisions relative to the whole national heritage, including buildings and artifacts, but also nature and landscape. These claims are supported by large parts of Georgian society; moreover, the national space has indeed been widely appropriated as Orthodox. Secularization can be described as grassroots societal change leading to autonomization of a public sphere from religion⁴². In Georgia, we are witnessing the opposite process of merging between the national and the religious fields. This process is not only enforced from the top, it is rather the consequence of new conceptions of the nation promoted by religious as well as secular actors. That is why we qualify it as a process of de-secularization of national heritage.

In any case, the Orthodox Church of Georgia, although favouring the merging of national and religious space, is not the only institution to be blamed for the process. Other actors, religious and laity, with various motivations, also contribute to such a development. This can be explained by the politicization of this issue.

Loose management as a State response

Why most politicians shared a secular conception of the State and of the policy to be implemented, all successive Georgian leaders have tried to benefit from the legitimacy provided by Orthodoxy⁴³. They did not perceive such a tactical move as a threat, since religion had served the national project of the Independent State and since the ecclesiastical institution was weak enough to supposedly remain under control. The erection of a monument dedicated to St. George, in Tbilisi on Freedom Square, which has been criticized by the Church, illustrates competing –by secular or religious actors- mobilization of Orthodoxy⁴⁴. In such a context, how to explain the appropriation by the Church of the national space? The paradox is that this process has accelerated since the arrival to power of M. Saakashvili, that is to say of a government who was suspicious vis-à-vis the Patriarchate and strongly committed to religious pluralism and the freedom of conscience, as proclaimed in the legislation⁴⁵.

If the legacy of previous policies has undoubtedly contributed to this acceleration, most fundamentally, it is the result of the rationale and practice of public action since the Rose Revolution. The transformation of public space is also a good observing point of how State institutions operate.

Dealing with an ambiguous legal legacy

The Church has happened to be in a position to shape or appropriate the national space thanks to the restitution of ecclesiastical property, which led to granting to it a large share of national heritage. The first text on the status of religious buildings was adopted even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, an evidence of how crucial this issue was. This is a resolution of the Council of Ministers of Georgia (still communist) of April 12, 1990 "on religious issues" which declared "all places of worship of the Orthodox Church of Georgia located on the territory of the Republic and all movable and immovable property they owned" property of the Church and admitted to it the right to draw up an inventory independently, "according to the rules and traditions of the Church of all Orthodox churches exist in Georgia, as well as their goods and funds"⁴⁶. But the then existing legislation did not allow the implementation of such a resolution. During the first years of independence, the restoration of churches was done spontaneously, out of a clear legal framework.

Hence (!) the constitutional agreement signed between the Orthodox Church of Georgia and the State on October 14, 2002, although negotiated in a specific context and with only one of the players of the religious sphere to the exclusion of all others, remains of great importance: it has been so far the only act regulating relations between the state and the Orthodox Church. The question of church property is central: five of the twelve articles are entirely devoted to this issue. The text states that "the churches, monasteries, on duty or not, are the property of the Church as well as the land on which they are located"⁴⁷. There are crucial financial issues at stake⁴⁸, but as important is the question of history. The agreement seeks to compensate the prejudice caused during Soviet time. Article 11 recognizes the material and moral damages that the Church has suffered while losing its independence (especially from 1921 to 1990), the State agrees to return to the Church property confiscated and pay compensation⁴⁹. A provision inserted at the last minute at the initiative of the Church states: "With the consent of the Church, the State issues permits or licenses

for the use of official symbols and terminology of the Church, as well as for the production, import and distributing items of worship "(Article 6, Section 6). An annex to the agreement gives a broad definition of "worship items" requiring approval of the Patriarchate; they include the "churches, monasteries and buildings of Ecclesiastical purpose (their planning, archaeology, construction, restoration, conservation)"⁵⁰. This statute provides the Orthodox Church of Georgia with a huge influence over all places of worship. As seen above, the representatives of other faiths were right to fear that the property confiscated by the Soviet regime would never be returned⁵¹.

The examination of the conditions in which the constitutional agreement was signed is beyond the scope of this paper. Let us just remind that it was negotiated by the Shevardnadze government at a time when it was weakened and in a context where concessions had just been made by the Patriarchate on vital international issues (including the Pope's visit to Georgia). But the agreement was not put into question nor amended after M. Saakashvili came to power, and the analyze of the political use and implementation of the agreement gives significant insight on the kind of public policy that have contributed to strengthening the public role of the Orthodox Church of Georgia.

The defense of religious freedom and pluralism was one of the key issues for the new government; many members were activists from the Liberty Institute, one of the most active NGOs struggling against religious discrimination. The authorities have indeed taken action to end violence against minority faiths, repeatedly denounced in international reports, and have attempted to address the concerns of minority religions on the difficulties of registration, so prejudicial to religious practice⁵². This shows that the public authority has the means to undertake actions in fields considered as a priority.

However, authorities did little to enable the restitution of minority faiths property, to protect the non-Orthodox religious heritage, in short, to preserve the pluralism of public space. Although since 2007, the Armenian church of St. Nshan has been awarded a status of cultural heritage protected by the Ministry of Culture and Historical Monuments of Georgia it is in bad needs for repair. Another Armenian church, St. Gevorg of Mughni church, dated from the 13th century, collapsed on November 19 2009⁵³. The local authorities were passive and did not seek to arbitrate disputes about Catholic and Armenian churches, even though they had the means to do so. Some Armenian organizations have stressed for example, that permission for controversial restoration work in Norashen was delivered by Tbilisi City administration.

Weak Institutionalization as conflict resolution tool

This passivity is the result of a style of politics. The authorities did little to clarify their relations with the Church and have perpetuated Shevardnadze tradition of blurred and informal political practices that promote provisional *ad hoc* and highly personalized arrangements⁵⁴.

Georgia, in contrast with other post-Soviet states, has never adopted a specific law on religion⁵⁵. Concrete mechanisms of enforcement of the provisions included in 2002 constitutional agreement have never emerged. None of the planned committees have been created so that the inventory of items to be returned has never been achieved, paving the way for very different interpretations of what constitutes property of the Orthodox Church of Georgia⁵⁶. Nana Devdariani the Ombudsman when the agreement entered into force, considered for example that the provisions of the agreement declaring all Orthodox property in the country to be the property of the Patriarchate relate only to property that belonged historically to the Patriarchate, not to what has been recently acquired⁵⁷.

Although several texts on the status of Church property have been adopted under the following government, numerous problems remain. The 2007 Law⁵⁸ on "the preservation of cultural

heritage" (chapter 1, article 2, paragraph 3) recalls that the Patriarchate owns a significant part of cultural heritage, but does not regulate relations with the State. In addition, there are some contradictions between different texts. Administrative structures inherited from the Soviet Union (Council for Religious Affairs) fell out of use and have not been replaced, so up to now, there is no institution formally in charge of relations with the cults. In the absence of bureaucracy, the State delegates the actual managing of the relationships with the Orthodox Church of Georgia to personal networks, hence contributing to its dependence on religious legitimacy. Civil servants or politicians who serve as intermediaries between the Patriarchate and the authorities are unofficially mandated precisely because they are known as pious and / or because of their good relations with the Church.

This functioning of the State based on weak institutionalization is not specific to relations with the cults, but the trend is exacerbated in this field. The first reason for such specificity is the popularity enjoyed by the Church and its status in public opinion⁵⁹. The involvement or even the sole mention of the Church in a project is likely to significantly facilitate all administrative procedures such as land registration, registration of property deeds, connecting to the electricity grid, etc.

Second reason: the lack of formal and clear procedures provides leaders with political resources that become instrumental when their popularity withers. For example, the restitution of the property, which has been taking place without adequate transparency, provides the government with an opportunity to develop clientelistic strategies. Pre-election periods are particularly fruitful for the Patriarchate: plots of land or real estate have been generously transferred by Presidential Decree. But informal procedures-based policies are fragile and sometimes risky, as illustrated by the controversy surrounding the construction of a church on a hill near Batumi, in Peria. Municipal authorities had declared the construction illegal under the pretext that no building permission had been granted to it. The building was then destroyed overnight (it is not clear by whom). But in fact, most churches recently built in Ajara are not adequately registered, have no status or hybrid status. According to some rumors, in this precise case, the president planned to build a recreation center, according to others, this land was also coveted by the Ministry of the Interior (whose minister is a Catholic): in any case, personal related motivation is seen as the main rationale for prevention the church construction. The reaction of the clergy has been so strong that the authorities who had opposed the construction have been disallowed at the higher level. A new church is being built in the same place. As illustrated in this case, mechanisms intended to strengthen the power leads precisely to the weakening of the state and reinforce the Church.

The lack of precise rules, as well as contradictions between existing laws, leads to systematization of exceptions and to providing bureaucracies in charge of their implementation with substantial room for maneuver. Hence, the gap is huge between the declared policies and actual practices, between what is decided at the "top" of the state and what is implemented at lower levels of bureaucracy. Thus, evidence abounds of administrative harassment preventing the opening of non orthodox places of worship. While minority faiths are free to operate by law, their members face bureaucratic discrimination and encounter difficulties to have their legal rights to free worship recognized⁶⁰. For example, according to T. Nakaidze, an activist from an ajar NGO, in 2008, when the Georgian Muslims built a mosque in Aspindza, "the head of the local administration asked if [they] had permission from the patriarchate"⁶¹. In addition, interviews conducted in various ministries show clearly that those involved in the relations between Church and State have a poor knowledge-or even total ignorance- of the existing legislation, which is much hence less compelling than tacit agreements with Patriarchate⁶².

The third reason for such a loose management is that it is seen as an efficient conflict prevention device. The lack of formalization and of institutionalization of arrangements makes them temporary and dependent on short-term balance of power. This is why the Orthodox Church of Georgia has repeatedly requested that rules defining ownership be clearly established, while the government does not want. The Patriarchate has been trying to institutionalize its gains, while for the state the blurring of the rules is seen as an opportunity to change them when needed. That does not mean that laws and rules, even dormant, are irrelevant: the Church representatives or other religious groups close to it regularly refer to the existing legal framework to justify the *de facto* situation. The constitutional agreement has a legitimizing function of informal relations, and precisely because legislative acts are necessary to make the bargaining arrangements sustainable, the authorities prefer to avoid them.

The government hopes to reverse the balance of power without having to open a public debate, in itself perceived as a threat because it could activate social and political cleavages. Discussion about the role of the Church is especially threatening since it has become one of the issues that create most polarization inside Georgian society. As Orthodoxy has become a fundamental element of Georgian identification, conflicts around religion might be structured along ethnic lines, a nightmare for political leaders. Moreover all ideological and political cleavages, even when they are not related to religious issues, tend to find a public expression through religion, a tendency that has accelerated in 2008-2009⁶³: conceptions of national identity, endogenous legitimacy versus exogenous political legitimacy, pro-Western versus national or pro Russian orientation, etc.

On February 10, 2010, a student rally was held in the church Bagrati to protest against the signing of a memorandum of cooperation between former Prime Minister Z. Noghaideli and United Russia: churches have become the arena of political struggle⁶⁴. This example illustrates that the shaping of national space participates in the development and of the definition of a political space. Building churches leads to setting the framework inside which political confrontation is thought and can take place, to drawing the boundaries between what is legitimate and what is not and finally to defining the borders of the relevant political community.

Notes:

1. This study is a part of the broader research project on the Church and religious practice in contemporary Georgia supported and on the post-Soviet South (Projet SUDSOV, “Le Caucase et l’Asie centrale, un autre Sud?”), supported and funded by the Agence Nationale pour la Recherche (ANR Les Suds). I am grateful to Nino Kalandarishvili, Marina Elbakidze, Merab Tsindeliani, Sopo Zviadadze and Emil Adelkhanov, as well as to an anonymous referee for his/her illuminating comments and additions.

2. Nora P. Jordan D.P. (eds), *Rethinking France: Les lieux de mémoire. Vol 2, Space*, Chicago University Press, 2006.

3. Paul Manning, “Materiality and Cosmology: Old Georgian Churches as Sacred, Sublime, and Secular Objects,” *Ethnos* 73:3 (Sept., 2008), available at : <http://www.dangerserviceagency.org/pdf/Linguistic%20anthropology/Manningfinalgalley.pdf> (accessed February 15, 2010). See a more pro-Church

overview: *Witness Through Troubled Times: A History of the Orthodox Church of Georgia, 1811 to the Present*. Ed. Tamara Grdzeldze, Martin George & Lukas Vischer. London: Bennett & Bloom, 2006.

4. See for example Paul Manning, *Georgian Drinking Culture*, <http://www.dangerserviceagency.org/drinking.html>; Florian Mühlfried, "Postsojetische Feiern : das Georgische Bankett im Wandel", In *Soviet and post-Soviet politics and society*, Ibidem Verlag, 2006. Kevin Tuite, [2005] Conference on Language, History and Cultural Identities in the Caucasus. *The Autocrat of the Banquet Table: the political and social significance of the Georgian supra*. 18 June 2005; School of International Migration and Ethnic Relations of Malmö University, Sweden at <http://www.mapageweb.umontreal.ca/tuitekj/publications/Tuite-supra.pdf> (accessed April 7, 2010) and Gia Nodia, ed., *Kartuli supra da samokalako sazogadoeba*. (Georgian Feast and Civic Society). Tbilisi: Caucasus Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development, 2000.

5. Some parishioners, thanks to their interpersonal and professional networks, sometime dating from Soviet times, were able to convince civil servants from different administrations not to ask for the required documents or to be connected to electricity grip, for example. Interviews with parishioners, September 2009.

6. The convent which has a dozen religious was occasionally pelted with stones. Interview with nuns, Akhalkalaki, July 2004.

7. In Bolnisi, see for example *Mtavari gazeti*, April 20, 2004.

8. Interviews with representatives of state authorities, Akhalakaki, July 2004.

9. See <http://www.regnum.ru/news/armenia/603949.html> (accessed February 24, 2010). In the site of the Patriarchate, the term is now "diocese of Dmanisi".

10. *Resonansi*, December 10, 2008.

11. See for example the interview by G. Andriadze, *Vechernyj Tbilisi*, Novembre 25, 2009. <http://www.vechernitbilisi.net/item.asp?id=15> (accessed February 15, 2010). There is no claim over churches or monasteries in the North Caucasus, that is to say, in the canonical territory of another Orthodox Church. Parishes of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are considered by the COG to be under its jurisdiction (Nikozi and Tskhinvali Diocese, Tskhum-Abkhazeti Diocese).

12. These mosques are built on private land by the community of believers, and are not registered as religious organizations. For contemporary Islam in Ajara, see Ruslan Baramidze, *Islam and Muslims in Ajara, (Historical-Ethnographic and Socio-Cultural aspects)*, PhD thesis. Batumi, 2008.

13. Notwithstanding a lack of official recognition, the Ajara Muftiyat manages the mosques of Ajara and Imereti, but not the Muslims of Samtskhe-Javakheti. Interview with the Mufti, September 2009. The status of Meskhetians is much less secure. Most of them were deported in 1944 and only 50 families managed to return without legal consent to their 'homeland'. See Tom Trier, Andrei Khanzhin, eds., *The Meskhetian Turks at a Crossroads. Integration, Repatriation or Resettlement?* Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2007; Sophie Tournon, "Géorgie: L'ajournement indéfini du rapatriement des déportés de Meskhétie", in *Les Déportations en héritage. Les peuples réprimés du Caucase et de*

Crimée hier et aujourd'hui, eds. Aurélie Campana, Grégory Dufaud, Sophie Tournon (Presses Universitaire de Rennes, 2009), 193-204.

14. Problems have arisen in Abastoumani, P'late, in the Adigeni region, in the village of Chela, etc. See for example Institute for War and Peace Reporting, *Georgia: Minority Faiths Face Bureaucratic Hurdles*, February 20, 2009, CRS No. 481, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/49a3a7d7c.html> (accessed October 7, 2009).

15. By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service "GEORGIA: "Orchestrated reaction" against religious minorities' buildings", October 25, 2006 at <http://www.forum18.org>.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. The Jewish community also experienced problems in the return of property confiscated during Soviet rule. International Religious Freedom Report, 2005 at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51553.htm> (accessed March 11, 2009).

20. This quotation stems from a treatise on Georgian cultural heritage by Ilia Chavchavadze from 1899, it criticizes Armenian claims for a "Greater Armenia". See "kvata ghaghadi" at http://www.iliachavchavadze.ge/pdf/qvaTa_RaRadi.pdf (accessed April 6, 2010).

21. Violence has sharply declined since 2004.

22. By Felix Corley, *op. cit.*

23. Site of Liberty Institute, July 1 2004.

24. *Axali Taoba*, December 10, 2008.

25. *Asaval-Dasavali*, December 15-21, 2008. *Kviris Palitra*, December 22-28, 2008.

26. Site of Liberty Institute July 1, 2004.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Whereas Ilia Chavchavadze, in *Kvata Ghaghadi*, claimed that the vestiges of the past demonstrate who the land belongs to, see for example T. Gordadzé "[La Géorgie et ses hôtes ingrats. Conflits politiques autour de l'autochtonie](#)", (Georgia and It's "Ungrateful Guests". Political Conflict above Autochtony), *Critique Internationale* 10 (January 2001).

29. The Nativity Epistle By His Holiness and Beatitude Catholicos Patriarch of All Georgia Ilia II, January 6, 2010 at http://www.patriarchate.ge/_en/ (accessed February 10, 2010).

30. The linkage between the protection of cultural heritage and national claims, although not specific to Georgia, has deep roots in this case, and for historical reasons, "patrimonialization" of ecclesiastical good played a crucial role in the Georgian national narrative. See for example Grdzeldze, Tamar & Fisher, Lukas, *Witness through Troubled Times, History of the Orthodox Church of Georgia from 1811 to the Present*. London: Bennett & Bloom, 2006 and Vardosanidze, Sandro, *Sakartvelos*

martmadidebluri samotsikulo ek'lesia 1917–1952 ts'lebshi (The apostolic orthodox church of Georgia during 1917–1952), Tbilisi: Mecniereba (in Georgian), 2001.

31. On the policy toward religious heritage in the Soviet Union and Russia, see Musin, Alexander E., *Vopjushchie k'amni. Russk'aja tserk'ov' i k'ul't'urnoe nasledie rosii na rubezhe t'ysjachelet'ij (The crying stones. Russian orthodox church and the cultural heritage of Russia at the turn of millennium)*, Sankt-Peterburg: Peterburgskoje vost'ok'ovedenije (in Russian), 2001.

32. Many other cases illustrate the link between concern about cultural heritage and religious practice. One can evoke the attempts of young musicians to restore the original Georgian liturgy.

33. About new and old churches, see P. Manning, *op.cit.*

34. About aesthetic and religious value, see P. Bourdieu, “Piété religieuse et dévotion artistique. Fidèles et amateurs d'art à Santa Maria Novella“, *Actes de la Recherche en sciences sociales* 105,1 (1994): 71-74.

35. <http://www.blagovest-info.ru>, October 19, 2009 (accessed February 18, 2010).

36. “Georgia’s Historical Monuments of Mtskheta inscribed on Danger List”, Sunday, June 28, 2009 at <http://whc.unesco.org/en/news/535> (accessed February 13, 2010).

37. http://www.newsgeorgia.ru/human_factor/20091015/151248537.html (accessed February 12, 2010).

38. <http://www.blagovest-info.ru>, February 10, 2010 (accessed February 12, 2010).

39. Most Georgian saints are heroic characters of the Georgian history.

40. Joint UNESCO (WHS)/ICOMOS Expert mission report/ Historical monuments of Mskheta and Bagrati Cathedral and Gelati Monastery (Georgia) June 2 – 10, 2008.

41. Agreements have been signed with several Ministries, for example with the Ministry of Environment Protection and National Resources.

42. Jean Baubérot makes a distinction between laicization, seen primarily as the work of politics to reduce the social significance of religion as an institution, even to deinstitutionalize it, and secularization, which implies a relative and gradual loss of social relevance of religion, due mainly to social changes, Baubérot Jean, *Histoire de la laïcité française*, Que Sais-je, PUF, Paris, 2000, p 23.

43. As illustrated, after the Rose revolution, by the inauguration ceremony in Gelati or by the adoption of a new flag; on religious processes during the late Shevardnadze regime from anthropological perspective: Ketevan Khutsishvili, *The Changing Religious Situation and Public Security*. Tbilisi: Iv. Javakhishvili Institute of History and Ethnography, 2004 (in Georgian with English summary, pp. 197-219).

44. The GOC considers that it does not suit canonical rules of saints’ representation.

45. See Articles 14 and 19 of the 1995 Constitution, for example.

46. Resolution #183 of the Council of Ministers of Georgia. See also Nugzar Papuashvili, “Obskurantism v Gruzii” (Obscurantism in Georgia), *Religia i obšestvo (Religion and Society)* 2, Centr kul'turnyx vzaimosvâzei Gruzii, Tbilissi, 2003.

47. "Georgia: Serious Concerns Over Draft Religion Law". Felix Corley, Keston News Service, July 9, 2002. The text has been published in *Sakartvelos respublika*, October 15, 2002. About civil society debates, see for example *Eklesia da samokalako sazogadoeba. Sakartvelo XXI sauk'unis dasac'q'isi, (The Church and Civil Society, Georgia, beginning of XXI century)*, kavkasis saxli, Tbilisi, 2001. See also the Keston Institute site, <http://www.keston.org>, RFE/RL, May 16, 2001 (accessed February 10, 2010).
48. Church authorities have claimed that 20 to 30 percent of the country's land area at one time belonged to the Church. According to various sources, the value of the returned property may exceed 3 billion GEL.
49. This point was especially controversial, since the Church was not the only victim of confiscation.
50. As well as "ecclesiastical paintings, liturgical items, baptismal fonts, book rests, candlesticks, censers, rosaries crockery for holy water, wine, soil, oil and chrism; icons, crosses, ecclesiastic candles, liturgical (ritual) wine, holy water priests' vestments theological-liturgical and spiritual-educational literature, as well as tele-cinema-audio and radio production of the same purpose." "Georgia: Veto For Patriarchate Over All Church-Building and Religious Literature", by Felix Corley, Keston News Service, October 23, 2002
51. Bishop Songulashvili regretted that the concordat allows restitution only of confiscated Orthodox churches and does not allow other faiths to regain religious buildings confiscated by the Soviet regime. He believes it is now "impossible" for other faiths to sign individual agreements with the government. "This will require constitutional changes - it is not realistic." He believes it is better to have a religion law that abides by international religious liberty commitments. "Georgia : Mixed Reaction to Orthodox-State Concordat", by Felix Corley, Keston News Service, October 15, 2002.
52. Since April 2005, religious organizations can be registered as private entities, but this status does not solve all the problems facing minority groups. Some religious groups complained that the amendment did not make provisions for registering property that religious groups already owned under personal titles. Only a few religious groups, as the Mormons, are registered at the Ministry of Justice. International Religious Freedom Report 2005 <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51553.htm>, accessed 11 March 2009,
53. Institute for War and Peace Reporting, *Georgia: Collapse of Armenian Church Provokes Row*, December 4, 2009, CRS #522, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4b1e0df42c.html> (accessed February 12, 2010).
54. See also Robia Charles: *Religiosity and Trust in Religious Institutions: Tales from the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia)*. Summer 2009. UC Berkeley: Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies. Available from: <http://www.escholarship.org/uc/item/1b88b59g> (accessed April 6, 2010).
55. "Bishop Pasotto expresses frustration that officials – who he says are not opposed to Catholic activity – tell them they cannot change the situation. "The most unpleasant thing is that from the political side, for all religious problems – such as over a law on religion – there is complete inaction. Is this from incompetence? Is this from

fear?" "By Felix Corley, Forum 18 News Service "GEORGIA: "Orchestrated reaction" against religious minorities' buildings", October 25, 2006 at <http://www.forum18.org> (accessed February 20, 2010).

56. Members of the committee in charge of the inventory of Church property have been designated, but the committee has never operated.

57. "Georgia : Mixed Reaction to Orthodox-State Concordat", by Felix Corley, Keston News Service, October 15, 2002, *op.cit.*

58. „კულტურული მემკვიდრეობის შესახებ“, 4708-I, 2007-05-08.

59. According to all public opinion polls, the Catholicos Patriarch is the most popular public character in Georgia. For example, the rate of trust is 94,2% according to a research conducted by the International Centre on Conflicts and Negotiation (ICCN) with the support of the Dutch Charity Organization Cordaid in 2008. http://www.iccn.org.ge/text/sociological/cordaid_2008_polling_results.pdf (accessed April 6, 2010). According to IRI, USAID, Baltic Surveys / The Gallup Organization, IPM Georgian National Study, September 29 - October 5, 2009, 96% has a favorable opinion about the Church, available at: <http://www.iri.org.ge/eng/poll/October2009-eng.pdf> (accessed April 6, 2010).

60. Institute for War and Peace Reporting, *Georgia: Minority Faiths Face Bureaucratic Hurdles*, February 20, 2009, CRS #481, available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/49a3a7d7c.html> (accessed October 7, 2009).

61. *Ib.*

62. Far from being perceived as an inconsistency, this gap is used by the government as an advantage, allowing two opposite policies to be carried out in parallel, the first oriented toward the international arena, the second toward domestic arena.

63. As illustrated on one hand by the public reaction to the “attacks” upon the Church and on the other, by an open letter published on December 2009 protesting against the growing influence of the Church in public matters, and broadly speaking by growing confrontation between the Patriarchate and the Government.

64. http://www.rustavi2.com/news/news_text.php?id_news=35599&pg=1&im=main&ct=0&wth (accessed March 1, 2010).