RELIGION, NATIONAL IDENTITY, AND THE POLITICS OF GEORGIA

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ABSTRACT: Religion, National Identity, and the Politics of Georgia.
On October 17th, 1999, sixty Jehovah's Witnesses were attacked by a mob of Georgian religious nationalists. The leader of the mob, defrocked priest Basil Mkalavishvili, later stated that he had acted "in defense of Georgia" by attacking those that he believed to be "traitors to the motherland" for their "abandonment" of the Georgian Orthodox Church. As the police, the judiciary, the government, the church, and a fair number of ordinary people turned a blind eye – or outright lent their support to Mkalavishvili – in the following weeks, it became clear that many Georgians at least tacitly believed that what he was doing was right. This was not an isolated expression of hate. Many other acts of violence followed, targeting more Jehovah's Witnesses and members of other minority groups in Georgia. Some people – like Malkhaz Songulashvili of the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia – argue that people like Mkalavishvili and his associates were only "small fries" who "carried out [these] attacks on the orders of others." Allowing the public view of religious violence to remain fixed on people like Mkalashvili would leave them with the idea that it was only those who carried out the attacks who were responsible – thus neglecting the importance of other individuals and institutions. While studying individuals and institutions can help us better understand this intolerance, I believe that it cannot be fully grasped without acknowledging its deeper roots. I argue, therefore, that a particular vision of Georgian national identity – constructed around Orthodox Christianity – has animated the politics of Georgia since its independence, motivating exclusionary policies at best and violent religious nationalism at worst. Political leaders have consistently drawn upon narratives of Georgian nationhood, power, and prestige being tied to Orthodox Christianity and have looked to the Georgian Orthodox Church to legitimize their regimes. This paper, therefore, examines how and why religion has been centered in Georgian identity discourse, and its impact on politics.

Keywords: *Georgia, Former Soviet Space, Orthodox Church, Orthodox Christianity, Religion, Nationalism, Identity, Politics of Memory, Religious Violence, Human Rights.*

It is often claimed that the history of Georgia began in 326 CE, at a seemingly unspectacular moment, when King Mirian III of Caucasian Iberia found himself "lost [and] blinded" in the wilderness.[1] Orthodox Christian sources recount that shortly after he set out from his palace in Mtskheta to hunt at the foothills of the nearby Mt. Tkhoti, Mirian III was "suddenly gripped by an evil spirit, and he [began to] burn with a desire to destroy the Christian people of his land."[2] As he began to return to Mtskheta to enact this desire, however, "the sun was eclipsed" and the king was either "surrounded by darkness" or, as some have suggested, outright blinded by divine power.[3] Frightened, Mirian III "prayed to the pagan gods" [sic.] to save him, but "his prayers [ultimately] went unanswered" as the land around him remained blanketed in shadow.[4] Left in utter despair, his mind began to race. He recalled something that had happened just a few days prior, when a missionary from the Roman Empire – a woman now recognized as St. Nino by the Georgian Orthodox Church – had arrived at his court and miraculously healed his sick daughter.[5] While impressed, Mirian refused to recognize this act as the work of the divine. But now, left without any other options, he called out to "Nino's God" to ask for deliverance from his plight, promising to convert to Christianity if he was saved.[6] And indeed, he was. As "the darkness scattered and the sun shone as [it did]

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1 P. Ioseliani and Solomon Caesar Malan, *A Short History of the Georgian Church* (Kondon: Saunders, Otley and Company, 1866), https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008731264, 24.

2 Archpriest Zakaria Machitadze, "Saint Nino, Equal-to-the-Apostles and Enlightener of Georgia," Orthodox Christianity, http://orthochristian.com/7215.html.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.; It should be noted that Mirian was a Zoroastrian and therefore a believer in a single God, Ahura Mazda, not many.

5 P. Ioseliani and Solomon Caesar Malan, *A Short History of the Georgian Church* (Kondon: Saunders, Otley and Company, 1866), https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008731264, 24; Some versions of this story claim that Nino healed his sick wife, rather than his daughter.

6 Ibid., 24.

before," Mirian cried out to the heavens that "Thou art the God preached by Nino, God of gods and King of kings."[7] After returning to Mtskheta, King Mirian "went immediately to the bramble bushes where Saint Nino dwelt" and "greeted her with great honor and spent several hours [with her] seeking her counsel."[8] Upon her recommendation, Mirian immediately messaged Emperor Constantine of the Roman Empire, requesting that he send "priests to baptize the people of [Caucasian Iberia] and architects to build churches" for them.[9]

Mirian's conversion – and subsequent declaration of Christianity as the national religion of Georgia – is, therefore, often "perceived not only as a story of Georgia becoming Christian but also as a process of the formation of Georgia as a body politic and of its acquiring a place in the universal history and a specific political function within the Christian community" of states and peoples.[10] Moreover, much of the "symbolic imagery forged [around these events] has been consistently replicated in later Georgian discourses" during attempts to reconstruct and rejuvenate Georgian national identity.[11] Over time, this came to mean that "conversion was understood as [more than] a mere act" of becoming Christian.[12] Rather, later Georgian writers "processed conversion as the appearance and establishment of the nation on the stage of history…as a result of which an entirely new paradigm was created – that of a unique Christian nation, but [one that was] equally an integral member of the [larger] Christian [community]" centered in Western Europe.[13]

As such, the fact that Georgia changed allegiances from the Sassanid Empire to the Roman Empire because of its conversion should not be ignored. The adoption of Christianity meant embracing an identity – and historic destiny – that was entwined with the West. Later retellings of the story of King Mirian's conversion tell us that its religious significance

7 Archpriest Zakaria Machitadze, "Saint Nino."

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Nikoloz Aleksidze, "A Nation Among Other Nations: The Political Theology of the Conversion of Georgia," *Missionaries and Evangelization in Late Antique and Early Medieval Europe (4th-13th Centuries)*, 2016.

11 Nikoloz Aleksidze, "A Nation Among Other Nations."

12 Ibid.

13 Nikoloz Aleksidze, "A Nation Among Other Nations."

gradually became less important than its political significance in the Georgian collective conscience. Joining and establishing bonds with the West – with Christian Europeans – deeply impacted the way that Georgians understood themselves and their history. Nikoloz Aleksidze explains that "Nino [was] presented as [someone who] validated the rule of [the] royal house…by sealing the eternal allegiance of [Georgia] to the Greek realm, thus making it Western and forbidding [its king] from ever initiating campaigns against the Greeks" and, in turn, forbidding the Greek king from initiating campaigns against the Georgians.[14] Later kings "assumed the role of an arbiter between the Western and Eastern worlds, between Byzantium and Iran, [and] therefore carved out a place for Georgia [at least in the Georgian conscience] as the third major power of the world."[15] Appeals to this religious and political history were popular during times when Georgia was threatened by its Muslim neighbors – usually the Arabs, Iranians, or Turks – and re-emerged in the 1990s when fears of the "Islamization" of Georgia returned to the fore.[16] To this day, Georgia sees itself as a Western nation – as Christian, European, and democratic – and feels a greater sense of affinity to faraway Greece and Italy than it does to neighboring Armenia, Turkey, and Azerbaijan.[17] The divide between the "Christian West" and the "Muslim East" around which the Georgian worldview was crafted was muddied, however, when the Orthodox Christian Russians – supposedly their brothers in faith – entered the picture. For some time, Georgians and Russians enjoyed friendly relations with one another – beating back Muslim invasions together – and even entered a formal alliance with one another in 1783.[18] Just decades later, however, the Russian Empire annexed the fractured Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti in 1801 to "protect" it.[19]

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Svante E. Cornell, "Autonomy and Conflict: Ethnoterritoriality and Separatism in the South Caucasus - Cases in Georgia," Department of Peace and Conflict Research (Uppsala University: Uppsala, 2002), 159.

17 A personal observation from conversations with Georgians. It should be noted that Armenia is also overwhelmingly Christian – and shapes its identity around that fact – but does not emphasize a "European" identity as much as Georgia does.

18 "The Treaty of Georgievsk" (1783), https://www.russianlegitimist.org/the-treaty-of-georgievsk-1783.

19 Charles King, *The Ghost of Freedom: A History of the Caucasus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 22.

With the Russian annexation, the Georgian national identity was thrown into a state of flux. To Georgians, the idea of one of its Christian neighbors becoming an enemy was unthinkable. Resistance to the Russian annexation was, as such, limited at first. This quickly changed, however, when the Russians began appointing non-native administrators to "rearrange Georgian feudal society and government according to the Russian model" by introducing "Russian education and [new] ranks of nobility" and chipping away at historic symbols of the Georgian national identity, including its language and religious institutions.[20] This project culminated in the revocation of the autocephalous status of the Georgian Orthodox Church in 1811 – something that "aroused considerable vexation and indignation in the Georgian people" as "frescoes in churches were whitewashed and…icons and objects adorned with precious gold and silver were stolen" and brought back to Russia.[21] Georgian intellectuals took up the cause of resistance – Ilia Chavchavadze was chief among them. He – rightly – saw the Russian annexation of Georgia as an existential threat to the Georgian national identity.[22] He used art and literature to reconstruct and rejuvenate Georgian national identity, placing the Georgian Orthodox Church at the center of the nation's history and culture.[23] He once said that "Christianity, in addition to the teaching of Christ, means among the entire Georgian territory: Georgian-ness. Georgian and Christian mean one and the same thing. To convert to Christianity is to become Georgian."[24] When he said this, he drew on the historical experiences of the Georgian people and nation. His writings evoked strong religious nationalist sentiments, with figures like King Mirian III and Saint Nino featuring prominently, and used the past to comment on the state of Georgian public life in his own time.

20 Stephen F. Jones, "Russian Imperial Administration and the Georgian Nobility: The Georgian Conspiracy of 1832," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 65, no. 1 (1987): 53–76; "Georgia Within the Russian Empire," http://countrystudies.us/georgia/5.htm.

21 "Restoration of the Autocephaly of the Georgian Apostolic Church," https://www.holytrinityorthodox.com/calendar/los/March/12-08.htm; "Georgia Within the Russian Empire."

22 The end goal of the Russian annexation of Georgia was, after all, its integration into the Russian Empire.

23 Paul Crego, "Religion and Nationalism in Georgia."

24 Ibid.

Ilia Chavchavadze died in 1907 – though his legacy as the "Father of the Nation" loomed large – especially as the Russian Empire began to strain under internal and external pressure and the once-unthinkable possibility of Georgian independence became unthinkable no longer. With the outbreak of Civil War in Russia – and the subsequent collapse of Russian authority in its colonial possessions – the Georgian Orthodox Church regained partial autocephaly. Shortly thereafter, the Democratic Republic of Georgia – the first independent Georgian state since 1801 – stepped onto the world stage. For the few years that it enjoyed independence, the Georgian Orthodox Church played an important role in the political and cultural affairs of the Democratic Republic of Georgia.[25] Despite this, the state adopted a progressive outlook – as was championed by Chavchavadze – and found itself guided by a parliament that included women, as well as ethnic and religious minorities.[26] All of this came to an end only a few years later, however, when the Red Army marched south and ultimately brought Georgia into the fold of the Soviet Union.

For almost a century thereafter, it seemed that Chavchavadze's vision for Georgia was unlikely to ever be realized. But Georgia did not quietly fade into the annals of history. Indeed, there is a reason that Georgians often quip that "the Roman Empire is extinct, but Georgia still exists."[27] Such statements "express a public pride in the idea that the country has possessed a historical continuity of statehood since ancient times that has been interrupted but never extinguished."[28] The writings of Ilia Chavchavadze – and the brief moment of Georgian independence after World War

25 Katie Sartania, "Protest Rallies and Their Influence on Georgian History," *Heinrich Boll Steiflung*, 2019; "Religion, Nation, and Democracy in the South Caucasus."

26 This was surprising because the Georgian Orthodox Church was usually a very conservative institution. That it once endorsed democratic values, gender equality, and interfaith cooperation is a point of pride for liberals and a sore spot for conservatives; Tatia Kekelia, „Building Georgian National Identity" in Alexander Agadjanian, Ansgar Jödicke, Evert van der Zweerde (eds.), *Religion, Nation and Democracy in the South Caucasus* (Routledge: 2015); "Constitutent Assembly Members by Nationalities," https://agenda.ge/multimedia/georgias-1028-days-of-Independence/img/infogr/p5-min.png.

27 Katie Sartania, "Struggle and Sacrifice: Narratives of Georgia's Modern History," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

28 Katie Sartania, "Struggle and Sacrifice: Narratives of Georgia's Modern History," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

I – only strengthened this idea. So long as "language, homeland, and faith" remained a part of public life, so too would Georgian nationhood.[29] Thus, Georgians were ready to make the most of the faint glimmer of hope that appeared to them on March 31st of 1991 as Zviad Gamsakhurdia – then the Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia – bowed his head and entered a church.[30] The scent of burning incense filled the air, and the sound of liturgical hymns echoed off the high fresco ceilings of the building. It was Palm Sunday – one of the Great Feasts of Orthodox Christianity – but Gamsakhurdia had no plans to take part in any of the many commemorative ceremonies that were planned for the day. He had gone to the church for another reason entirely. With solemn reverence, he lit seven slender candles, placed them before an icon of Saint Nino – the patron saint of Georgia – as offerings, and began to pray.[31]

Gamsakhurdia had been waiting for this moment. Over the course of the preceding year, he had used his power as the Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia to gradually dismantle the social, political, and economic institutions of communism in his country. He had seen great success so far, and now, just one thing remained to be done – hold a referendum on Georgian independence from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. If this referendum passed, it would indicate popular support for cutting ties with Moscow and give Gamsakhurdia the mandate to forge a new path for his country – this time on the terms of the Georgian people. It was scheduled to take place on March 31st of 1991.[32] Thus, as Gamsakhurdia prayed, the people of Georgia voted on whether or not they wanted their country to remain a part of the USSR.

This was why Gamsakhurdia had come to the church. Even though the referendum was very likely to pass – Georgia had always been one of the most pro-independence republics in the USSR – the fate of his country afterwards was unclear.[33] A myriad of foreign and domestic threats to

29 Stephen Jones, "Religion and Nationalism in Soviet Georgia and Armenia," in Pedro Ramet ed. *Religion and Nationalism in the USSR and Eastern Europe* (Duke University Press: Durham, 1989), 187.

30 Elizabeth Shogren, "Nationalist Ideals Drive Georgian's Kremlin Battle."

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 "Results of Post-Soviet Independence Referendums 1991-1994," Statista, https://www.statista.com/statistics/1292544/ussr-independence-referendums/.

the success of Georgian independence still had to be addressed. The Soviet Union – though fraying – maintained an immensely powerful military and could easily stage an invasion of Georgia if it did not approve of its independence.[34] Political and economic instability inside Georgia, moreover, had the potential to cause crises that could boil over into civil war if mismanaged. As later events – like the 1993 constitutional crisis in Russia following the collapse of the economy under Boris Yeltsin – illustrate, these fears were well-founded.[35]

Thus, Gamsakhurdia petitioned God to help him secure and maintain the independence of Georgia.[36] He believed that his – and indeed all of Georgia's – insecurity about the future of the country could only be dispelled by divine power. He would, of course, have to prove that he was worthy of receiving it first. A priest motioned for Gamsakhurdia to step into the sanctuary to "pray for the nation" with him.[37] Gamsakhurdia did so, making his way through the double doors of the iconostasis – the barrier that physically divides the laity from the clergy to symbolize the divide between earthly and heavenly life – before approaching and kneeling before the altar on the other side.[38] He remained there – out of the public eye – for the rest of the day.[39]

Those unfamiliar with Gamsakhurdia – including the sizeable contingent of foreign journalists who had followed him to the church – were left baffled by this behavior. Other high-profile pro-independence leaders

34 Vincent Triola. "Russian Invasion of Georgia," September 1, 2021, https://vincenttriola.com/blogs/ten-years-of-academic-writing/russian-invasion-of-georgia; This capability was proven one year later in the War in Abkhazia, a conflict between the breakaway state of Abkhazia (and its Russian ally) and the rival the Gamsakhurdia government and Shevardnadze government of the Republic of Georgia. The Abkhazians were able to quickly secure their de-facto independence with Russian help.

35 Stephen Rosenberg, "Remembering Russia's Civil Siege," BBC News, October 3, 2003, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3161002.stm.

36 Stephen Rosenberg, "Remembering Russia's Civil Siege"; Dieter Nohlen, Florian Grotz, and Christof Hartmann, eds. *Elections in Asia and the Pacific: A Data Handbook: Volume 1: Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

37 Elizabeth Shogren, "Nationalist Ideals Drive Georgian's Kremlin Battle."

38 "The Layout of an Orthodox Church," https://www.stgeorgeparish.org.au/information/1029/1034/.

39 Elizabeth Shogren, "Nationalist Ideals Drive Georgian's Kremlin Battle."

in the USSR – like Boris Yeltsin in Russia, Levon Ter-Petrosyan in Armenia, and Ayaz Mutallibov in Azerbaijan – were being interviewed by prominent foreign newspapers, delivering campaign speeches, and parading through the capitals of their countries. But not Zviad Gamsakhurdia. This was because he saw Christianity as more than just a collection of beliefs and practices.[40] To him, it was a way to understand the divine bearing on history and politics – he saw God as being intimately involved in the shaping of destinies for people and states alike. It was a living tradition that encouraged the development of culture and morals. It was – above all, however – a fundamental part of "what it meant to be Georgian."[41] Like Chavchavadze before him, he felt that religion sustained Georgia, and that without it, the nation would disappear.[42]

These beliefs had set in motion his activities as a dissident many decades prior in the 1950s – which began with the distribution of pamphlets and flyers exposing the "theft of religious treasures" by the regime – and informed his many "periodicals, hunger strikes, and demonstrations" in defense of the Georgian "language [and] culture" in the 1970s.[43] He articulated that the "Georgian language and culture had [always] found [their] highest expression in the Christian religion" and that even amidst crises, the nation was sustained by a "spiritual culture" that was upheld by its premier religious institution – the Georgian Orthodox Church – and its faithful devotees.[44] Much of Gamsakhurdia's work, therefore, revolved around the promotion of the Georgian Orthodox Church and Orthodox Christianity as a part of the Georgian national identity and Georgian public life.

After centuries of repression under the Russian and Soviet states, however, the influence of the Georgian Orthodox Church and Orthodox Christianity was trending in the opposite direction. The fierce anti-religion campaigns carried out by Joseph Stalin and Nikita Khrushchev – initiat-

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Zviad Gamsakhurdia, "The Spiritual Ideals of the Gelati Academy," *Meskhishvili Drama Theater (May 20, 1990)*, https://www.allgeo.org/index.php/en/866-zviad-gamsakhurdia-the-spiritual-ideals-of-the-gelati-academy.

43 Svante E Cornell, "Autonomy and Conflict," 150; Elizabeth Shogren, "Nationalist Ideals Drive Georgian's Kremlin Battle."

44 Zviad Gamsakhurdia, "The Fingerless Policeman and the Crazy Congregation (Open Letter to the Editors of the Zugdidi Newspaper)."

ed in Gamsakhurdia's youth – had very nearly wiped it out. Hundreds of churches were closed, and thousands of monks and priests were executed. By 1956, "there were only seven students training for the priesthood" under the guidance of Church leadership.[45] One Georgian church history recounts that "there were so few Georgian clerics [left] that the service in the native language was rarely offered" and even less frequently taken.[46]

Thus, the Church was reduced to a shadow of its former self. Worse yet, it was placed in the undesirable position of being reliant on the state apparatus of the Soviet Union for survival. Though militantly atheist, the Soviet Union occasionally allowed the evocation of Georgian history, culture, and religion and drew on it for political legitimacy amidst times of crisis. Famously, Stalin did so in 1943 when he granted the Georgian Orthodox Church autocephaly as German troops marched deeper into the Soviet Union. Yet, the Georgian Orthodox Church was weak and politically dependent on a regime which outwardly loathed it. The longer this arrangement persisted, the clearer it became that "[the] leaders [of the Georgian Orthodox Church] were feeble – they had been co-opted as Soviet [policy] spokesmen since the war and were little respected" by the Georgian people.[47] Historian Stephen Jones suggests that the arrangements made by the Church with the USSR could be understood as both helpful and harmful for both parties as "state control of a subservient and demoralized Church alienated potential support for a new ethno-religious nationalism…[but] on the other hand, state co-optation of the Church…did give the Church some legitimacy and a higher profile in Georgian national affairs."[48] That being said, it was clear to all involved parties that the Church was more dependent on the state than the state was on the Church.

Seeing this state of affairs, Gamsakhurdia committed himself to revitalizing the Georgian Orthodox Church and worked to reduce its reliance on the Soviet state. He "drew many young people toward an interest in religion…[and] all the churches overflowed. The income of the Church increased…and so did the number of those applying to enter the seminary" for ordination.[49] With Gamsakhurdia's efforts, a small "religious

45 Stephen Jones, "Religion and Nationalism in Soviet Georgia and Armenia," 177.
46 Ibid., 177.
47 Ibid., 178.
48 Ibid., 178.
49 "Dr. Gamsakhurdia Writes to RCL," *Religion in Communist Lands* 4, no. 4 (Winter 1976).

revival" was taking place by the end of the 1960s.[50] Not everyone saw this as a positive development, however. Eduard Shevardnadze – the First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party in the early 1970s – saw an opportunity to "incorporate the antireligious campaign into a vigorous attack on corruption and ideological deviation" and tried to crack down on "religious festivals, church marriages, and baptisms" during his tenure.[51] Yet, as more and more dissidents began tying Orthodox Christianity to their work in "nationalist and civil rights movements," the Church grew in power and "began to take a far more visible role…in national life – especially among youth.[52] Even though the "attempts [of the Church] to identify itself with the nation" were quickly condemned as "ambitious self-interest" by the state-run communist press, religious figures – including Patriarch Ilia II – were invited to state events and were allowed to "hold positions of honor and dignity" in Georgian civil society.[53] Ultimately, the feasibility of campaigns like the one that Shevardnadze had tried to implement dropped dramatically as a result – the Church had become too powerful to persecute.

By the 1980s, Gamsakhurdia had emerged as the informal leader of the dissident movement in Georgia. But he was not just lauded for his opposition to communism. He had also become renowned for his commitment to Orthodox Christianity and the Georgian Orthodox Church. Tengiz Davidovich, another dissident, said that Gamsakhurdia "[was] a man who [knew] spiritual life well…[as] his will [was] subordinate to God… and he [depended] on God."[54] Many Georgians – especially religious ones – hung his portrait next to religious icons in their homes "out of respect" and looked to him with "hope that he [would] lead the nation to prosperity and independence."[55] This naturally invited – and continues to invite – comparison between Gamsakhurdia and biblical figures like Moses and Je-

50 Stephen Jones, "Religion and Nationalism in Soviet Georgia and Armenia," 184.

51 Ibid., 184.

52 S. Jomarjidze, "The Activity of the Georgian Communist Party in the Atheist Upbringing of Youth" (Tbilisi: Tbilisi University Publisher, 1985).

53 Stephen Jones, "Religion and Nationalism in Soviet Georgia and Armenia," 184; G. Bandzeladze, "Ra Movitsonot Dara Davgmot," 1981.

54 Elizabeth Shogren, "Nationalist Ideals Drive Georgian's Kremlin Battle."

55 Ibid.; Scott Shane, "Nationalist Leader in Soviet Georgia Turns Georgians against Minorities," Baltimore Sun, March 7, 1991, https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-1991-03-07-1991066043-story.html.

sus among the Georgian people.[56] He had stood with the Georgian people as they "groaned" under the "yoke" of the Soviet Union – often facing harsh persecution for doing so – and was ultimately willing to take leadership of the movement that would attempt to "deliver" the Church and its faithful from persecution.

By the end of the decade, the policies of Mikhail Gorbachev – especially perestroika – opened a window of opportunity for Gamsakhurdia to do so.[57] He ran for the presidency under the banner of the Society of Saint Ilia the Righteous – a religious-nationalist organization that he had founded at a labor camp – on a platform of anti-communism, nationalism, and religion. On May 26th of 1991, Gamsakhurdia was elected with 86.5 percent of the vote – an overwhelming show of support from the electorate. His success is often attributed to his ability to draw on "anxieties that resonated among Georgians – [namely] the threat of Georgia's disintegration, the fear of [Soviet] military power [as] the regime became increasingly unstable and unpredictable, and the perceived neglect of Georgian interests" after civilians were "killed in conflict with Soviet interior troops" just a few years prior – though his use of religion undeniably had an impact as well.[58] Even the name of the party he ran under – the Society of Saint Ilia the Righteous – draws on conceptions of national identity from the 19th century intellectual tradition in Georgia, which imagined religion as a core component of belonging to the Georgian nation – reflected his belief in the integrity of religion to Georgian public life. And if his margin of victory in the election is any indication, it was a popular one.[59]

Of course, it should be noted that Gamsakhurdia did not shy away from exploiting religious xenophobia. Some nationalists "voiced fears of

56 Personal observation during conversations with elderly Georgians on the Soviet Union.

57 Perestroika was the term used to describe policies or practices aimed at restructuring or reforming the economic and political system in the USSR under General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Mikheil Gorbachev. Such policies opened the door to nationalist and regionalist politics like those articulated by Gamsakhurdia.

58 Stephen Jones, "Georgia: Nationalism from Under the Rubble," in *After Independence: Making and Protecting the Nation in Postcolonial and Postcommunist States*, Lowell Barrington ed. (The University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, 2006), 257.

59 He won 86.5% of the vote with a turnout rate of 86% in the 1991 Georgian presidential election.

the 'Islamization' of Georgia" and one intellectual claimed – with distress – that "if the trends [of the time] continued, Muslims would [come to] make up almost half of Georgia's population" within just fifty years.[60] The most important item on Gamsakhurdia's political agenda – for "[his] sons to live in a Christian…Georgia" where "the spiritual health of the nation" was no longer in question – directly responded to this anxiety.[61]

Religion did not just inform Gamsakhurdia's campaign strategy though. It reappeared many times while he was in office – including in his first speech to the Supreme Council of the Republic of Georgia. There, he proclaimed that he was "fighting for the restoration of the religious and national ideals of [his] ancestors…[and] against the eternal night of godlessness" that he believed his enemies – both at home and abroad – embodied.[62] He claimed that his "honest aim" was "protected by [God]" and that Georgia's victory over the "eternal night" that threatened it was inevitable.[63] Yet, Gamsakhurdia believed that this would only be the case if he was the one at the head of the ship of state. He viewed himself as uniquely endowed with divine favor – as "the last in a long line of national heroes" who had "sacrificed [themselves] on the altar of the fatherland" for a cause greater than themselves.[64] This "tendency to self-glorification" led Gamsakhurdia to "equate Georgia with himself" and ultimately led to "anyone disagreeing with him [being branded] as a traitor" to the country – and because of the added religious dimension of his politics – to God.[65] As a result, personal disagreements and political disputes with Gamsakhurdia were recontextualized as betrayals of the Georgian nation and the Christian God. Georgian politics thus took on a profoundly dramatic character – they became a battle "between good and evil" upon which both the political and celestial orientation of Georgia rested.[66] Gamsakhurdia had positioned himself at the center of it all as the "savior" of the nation.

60 Svante E. Cornell, "Autonomy and Conflict," 159.

61 Elizabeth Shogren, "Nationalist Ideals Drive Georgian's Kremlin Battle."

62 Ibid."

63 Ibid.

64 Stephen Jones, "Georgia: The Trauma of Statehood," in *New States, New Politics*, Ian Bremmer and Ray Taras eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 511.

65 Svante E. Cornell, "Autonomy and Conflict," 165.

66 Stephen Jones, "Georgia: The Trauma of Statehood," 522; Svante E. Cornell, "Autonomy and Conflict," 165.

Expectedly, this alienated many groups from the nation-building project – especially the ethnic and religious minorities of the country, who bore the brunt of the "threats, bullying, and belittlement" that Gamsakhurdia encouraged.[67] This made foreign states reluctant to cooperate with Georgia. A Western diplomat who knew Gamsakhurdia well said that "he [was] a scary person…[whose] positions [bordered] on fascism."[68] He was "erratic" and it was clearly reflected in Georgian policy.[69] Even Boris Yeltsin, charged with advancing the geostrategic aims of Russia in the former Soviet Union, stated that he was "opposed to including Georgia" in the Commonwealth of Independent States.[70] He cited "human rights violations in the republic, most notably the government's support of armed attacks on the South Ossetian minority in Georgia."[71] The Georgian opposition to President Gamsakhurdia "[also] accused Gamsakhurdia, who [was] himself a former political prisoner, of imprisoning his political opponents for criticizing his government and of exercising dictatorial powers."[72]

Ultimately, Gamsakhurdia – but not his vision of a "theocratic program" for Georgia – would fade into the pages of history books after the 1991 coup attempt in the USSR deepened the polarization between him and the opposition beyond repair.[73] He had already lost a great deal of popular support after he introduced a "highly centralized system of politically powerful prefects…which essentially fulfilled the same role as the local party bosses" under the USSR and cracked down on public dissent through "a law prohibiting public criticism or slander maligning the 'honor and dignity' of the elected president" that targeted journalists and the opposition.[74]

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67 Stephen Jones, "Georgia: Nationalism from Under the Rubble," 258.

68 Scott Shane, "Nationalist Leader in Soviet Georgia Turns Georgians against Minorities."

69 Ibid.

70 The Commonwealth of Independent States was a new security alliance that would replace the defunct Warsaw Pact; Ibid.

71 "Conflict in Georgia: Human Rights Violations by the Government of Zviad Gamsakhurdia," Human Rights Watch, December 27, 1991, https://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/pdfs/g/georgia/georgia91d.pdf.

72 Ibid.

73 Paul Crego, "Religion and Nationalism in Georgia."

74 "Conflict in Georgia: Human Rights Violations by the Government of Zviad Gamsakhurdia."

Eventually, many members of his government – and a substantial number of national guard troops – defected to the opposition in protest of this policy, as well as his more general mismanagement of the new Georgian state. Shortly thereafter, civil war broke out between pro-government and anti-government factions. Amidst all of this, Eduard Shevardnadze – former First Secretary of the Georgian Communist Party and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union – was unexpectedly asked by the opposition to return to Georgia and serve as their leader.

Almost ten years later, as the sun began to set on the Tbilisi suburb of Gldani on October 17th of 1999, the sound of distant shouting echoed through the streets. Unbeknownst to its residents, this heralded the arrival of a "violent mob" of Georgian men – led by former Orthodox priest Basil Mkalavishvili – who had plans to attack a group of Jehovah's Witnesses at their weekly meeting for worship.[75] They made their way to the meeting house clad in cassocks and with "large iron crosses and sticks" in hand – all without being questioned by local law enforcement.[76] They methodically blocked off all of the exits to the building before forcing their way inside through the front door. The sixty Jehovah's Witnesses who were in the main room of the meeting house – having been in a worship service only a few moments prior – were ambushed. They were "beaten and struck with crosses, sticks, and belts" by the mob while Mkalavishvili "burned religious literature" and encouraged his "supporters [to join him] in prayer and song" as they carried out the attack.[77] Thus, the attackers praised their god as they "bruised their victims' bodies, tore their faces, and ripped their scalps" for almost an hour.[78] Individual reports collected by the European Court of Human Rights paint a gruesome picture of the scene. Mirian Arabidze was "surrounded by several stick-wielding men" and told that he was "going to die for Jehovah" as they kicked his head.[79] Lia Bakhutashvili was "attacked by a young priest" who "tore her clothing and pulled her by the

75 Felix Corley, "Two Leaders of Religious Violence Finally Sentenced but What about the Others," Forum 18 News, February 1, 2005, https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=503.

76 Case of 97 Members of the Gldani Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses and 4 Others v. Georgia, European Court of Human Rights, Strasbourg, 3 May 2007, 3.

77 Ibid., 7.

78 "Religious Persecution in Georgia – How Much Longer," Watchtower Online Library, 2001, https://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/102002045#h=2.

79 Case of 97 Members of the Gldani Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses, 3.

hair" before moving on to beat Nora and Nino Lelashvili – a mother and daughter who had both recently converted – with a "cross and stick" until they were unconscious.[80] Vladimer Kokosadze was beaten by six attackers before he "negotiated with [Mkalavishvili] to obtain permission for thirty women and children who [had] locked [themselves] inside [an] office" to leave the building.[81] They were allowed to do so, but were "followed and attacked in the street" by members of the mob just a few minutes later.[82] A ten-year-old girl was "dragged along by the hair" and a seven-year-old disabled boy was "punched in the head" by an attacker.[83] Alexi Khitarishvili "was beaten [and] then trampled on when he fell to the ground."[84] The recording of the attack shows that "several men held [him] upright and shaved his head" as onlookers mocked him by yelling "in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost" at him repeatedly.[85] Unable to shave him, the attackers continued to insult and strike him instead. Khitarishvili could hear his mother "screaming in the distance as she was attacked by a group of women" when he lost consciousness and fell to the floor.[86]

Without exception, the victims of the attack were "mocked, insulted, and called every name imaginable" to them – including "traitor."[87] One victim recalls being accused of "selling out the motherland for a bag of rice" while she was being beaten – implying that she had only become a Jehovah's Witness because she knew that she would receive material support from Western missions if she did so.[88] This was a sentiment that Mkalavishvili had expressed in the weeks preceding the attack. He voiced his disdain for the "Baptists, Pentecostalists, and other [evangelical] Christian groups" that had recently begun to swell in popularity with the assistance of Western missions and missionaries.[89] More Georgians than ever were

80 Ibid., 3.
81 Ibid., 3.
82 Ibid., 3.
83 Case of 97 Members of the Gldani Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses, 5.
84 Ibid., 5.
85 Ibid., 5.
86 Ibid., 3-4.
87 Ibid., 6.
88 Ibid., 6.
89 "Priest Damages Georgia's History of Tolerance," Deseret News, April 12, 2001, https://www.deseret.com/2001/4/12/19580334/priest-damages-georgia-s-history-of-tolerance.

leaving the Georgian Orthodox Church for such groups. A decade of political and economic tumult had left Georgia with a "twenty percent unemployment rate and an average salary of about fifty dollars a month."[90] Some people grew reliant on the charity of foreigners to live – and other people grew incensed at this fact. In a later interview, Mkalavishvili admitted that the "expensive [and] glossy paper of the Jehovah's Witnesses pamphlets" deeply upset him because "Georgian children [had to] read dim photocopies of hand-me-down textbooks" in their schools.[91] He pledged, as such, to "rid his country of [these] evangelical groups" and "accumulated hundreds of followers" sympathetic to his cause.[92] At first, Mkalavishvili organized "mass baptisms" in places of historical significance and "launched street campaigns" to challenge the influence of the evangelicals.[93] When it became clear that doing so was not enough, however, he began to use violence – ultimately culminating in the October 17th attack.

After the last of the Jehovah's Witnesses had been beaten unconscious, rendered immobile by their injuries, or scared away from the meeting house, Mkalavishvili sacked the building and burnt the remainder of its books and literature. As he did so, he defended "the validity of his actions [and] expressed satisfaction at their outcome" in an impromptu interview with a sympathetic cameraman who had captured the attack on tape.[94] He claimed that he had launched his crusade against the Jehovah's Witnesses "in defense of the Georgian nation, which [he thought] existed only thanks to Orthodoxy."[95] If Georgians repudiated Orthodoxy, he said, then the "collapse of the nation" would inevitably follow.[96] Mkalavishvili eventually left the meeting house when it became clear that there nothing left for him to destroy. It be would at least another hour before the victims of the attack were taken to the hospital. Some of the victims – including a mother of two – sustained "permanent damage" to their bodies as a result.[97]

90 Ibid.
91 Ibid.
92 Ibid.
93 Ibid.
94 Case of 97 Members of the Gldani Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses, 7.
95 "Priest Damages Georgia's History of Tolerance."
96 Notice the similarity to the language used by Chavchavadze and Gamsakhurdia; Ibid.
97 Felix Corley, "Two Leaders of Religious Violence Finally Sentenced."

As word of the attack began to reach the ears of the international community, a sense of bewilderment characterized their response. How had the Georgian people – renowned around the world for their reputation of tolerance – allowed something like this to happen in their country? How had a "mob of furious attackers" managed to beat innocent men, women, and children without being stopped? Most importantly of all, why were Mkalavishvili and his followers still walking free? After all, the widely circulated video footage of the attack could be reviewed to discern the identities of many of the attackers.[98] Leaflets posted in the area in the days preceding the attack identified Mkalavishvili as the leader of the mob by name. They read: "Leader of [the] Gldani Orthodox Eparchy Father [Basil] Mkalavishvili [and] his large number of followers strictly warn various sects like Jehovah's Witnesses, Evangelicals, Baptists, Adventists, and Krishnaites [sic.] to stop [their] anti-Orthodox activities in Georgia [and] to stop [their] satanic meetings [which stand] against the true Orthodox faith. We call for the Georgian Orthodox nation to never let [such] sectarian meetings take place and to actively defend our ancestors' Christian beliefs. This is the last warning."[99] With evidence like this, convicting them would be almost effortless. Moreover, the President of the Republic of Georgia – Eduard Shevardnadze – had come forward shortly after the attack to state that "[he] condemned this occurrence and believed that the law-enforcement agencies [of the country] should [open] a criminal case" to investigate it.[100] Despite everything, however, two years passed without any action. None of the attackers had been convicted, nor had the police opened a criminal case to investigate the attack.

How had things gotten this bad? Since Gamsakhurdia was deposed by the coup in 1992, something had happened in Georgia. The state had embraced his religious nationalist ideology and followed through on his vision for the country – even if it rejected Gamsakhurdia himself. This was because Shevardnadze – a savvy operator – saw doing so as politically advantageous. Shortly after assuming the office of the presidency, he announced that he "was baptized [sometime in 1992] at a Georgian Ortho-

98 "Religious Persecution in Georgia – How Much Longer."

99 "Memorandum to the U.S. Government on Religious Violence in the Republic of Georgia," Human Rights Watch, August 29, 2001, https://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/eca/georgia/georgia_memo_full.htm.

100 "Religious Persecution in Georgia – How Much Longer."

dox cathedral and [proudly proclaimed that] his new Christian name was Georgy."[101] In an interview conducted around the time of the announcement, he claimed that "[he] had a [religious] icon [of the Virgin Mary] in [his] office now, though there was a time not so long ago when [he] had Stalin's portrait on the wall."[102] Shevardnadze had reinvented himself. He was no longer the Communist Party boss of the 1970s and 1980s – he was a devout follower of the Orthodox Church who cared deeply about its continued relevance in Georgian life, including his own. This meant using the political power of the state to grant the Church concessions, thereby institutionalizing what was under Gamsakhurdia only talk. In this sense, Shevardnadze used religion in a much more dangerous way than his predecessor. Even though it likely was not a seriously held conviction for him, he used it in ways that had a greater impact on the public. One consequence of the promotion of a religious nationalist ideology, for example, was the practice of turning a blind eye to the persecution of ethnic and religious minorities who did not conform to the vision for the state articulated by Gamsakhurdia and enforced by Shevardnadze.

The "inaction of the authorities [had] sent the attackers the message that violence [against religious minorities] would be tolerated" in Georgia.[103] Emboldened by this impunity, they "stepped up their rampage of robbing, beating, and kicking Jehovah's Witnesses – in private homes, on the streets, and in places of worship" alike.[104] Between October 1999 and August 2001 – the window during which the violence was at its worst and most frequent – there were "over eighty documented attacks on Jehovah's Witnesses, affecting more than one thousand victims" across the country.[105] Exactly 784 formal complaints were lodged with the relevant authorities by the Jehovah's Witnesses, but "no careful and serious investigation had been caried out" into any of these complaints.[106] Mkalavishvili acknowledged that the refusal to investigate indicated that law enforcement and the government were on his side. In a 2001 interview with the BBC, he said "thank

101 "Shevardnadze Is Baptized, Becomes an Orthodox Christian," AP News, November 23, 1992, https://apnews.com/article/d0b3be0efe5c44136d3e56812420d83b.
102 Ibid.
103 Case of 97 Members of the Gldani Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses, 12.
104 Ibid., 12.
105 Ibid., 12.
106 Ibid., 12.

God that among our security services and policemen, there are people who are willing to help me. They realize how dangerous it is to have these sects in Georgia."[107] The chief of police in Gldani later stated that if "[he was] in the place of the attackers, [he] would have given the Jehovah's Witnesses an even worse time" and officers at the scene of the crime claimed that "they did not [want to] get involved in that type of incident" as a "neutral" party.[108] Officers who were tipped off to another impending attack refused to protect the Jehovah's Witnesses and stated that "they would not get beaten up in their place."[109] Shortly thereafter, the same officers were reportedly among a group of attackers who beat a group of Jehovah's Witnesses and ransacked the house that they were meeting in.[110] Mkalavishvili himself revealed in later interviews that "before going to a particular place, he would alert the police and the state security services" so that they would know what was going on – and therefore know not to intervene.[111] It can be fairly assumed that if local law enforcement had involved themselves in the incident, it would have been on the side of the attackers.

On the single occasion that an attempt was made to address the proliferation of violence, the investigation and hearing of the case were slowed to a crawl by obstruction from law enforcement and the judiciary. The police investigator for the case, for example, stated that "he could not be impartial" because he was an Orthodox Christian and was later revealed to have participated in one of Mkalavishvili's attacks.[112] Despite this, he was not relieved of his position. Expectedly then, the investigation was unhelpful in securing a conviction. Mkalavishvili was understood to be the mastermind behind – and organizer of – these attacks, but nothing was done to investigate him personally or involve him in the case. He was mentioned multiple times in the testimonies of defendants, including that of one woman who "confirmed that she had burned books, as her faith and [Mkalavishvili] had directed her to…[and that] she was prepared to kill on behalf of the Orthodox faith" if necessary.[113] In fact, the only time Mkalav-

107 "Keeping the Faith, Forcefully," Baltimore Sun, https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/bs-xpm-2002-09-04-0209040075-story.html.

108 Case of 97 Members of the Gldani Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses, 5.

109 "Memorandum to the U.S. Government on Religious Violence."

110 Ibid.

111 Case of 97 Members of the Gldani Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses, 7.

112 Ibid., 8.

113 Ibid., 9.

ishvili appeared before the court was when he and some of his supporters "burst into the courtroom [and] assaulted Jehovah's Witnesses, journalists, and foreign observers…with iron crosses" after a potentially damning testimony was delivered by a Jehovah's Witness earlier that day.[114] After order was restored, the court "imposed no penalties on the [mob] who had [just] occupied the courtroom by force" in an indication of its sympathy to their cause.[115]

At the close of the trial, only one person was found guilty of "having committed acts endangering public order" and given a sentence of three years of imprisonment.[116] Interestingly enough, this person was not Mkalavishvili, a member of the mob, or even a member of the political establishment that made the attacks possible in the first place – rather, this person was, in fact, one of the Jehovah's Witnesses who had been attacked by Mkalavishvili. He received this sentence for causing minor injuries to his attackers as they tried to beat and bloody him. The guilt of the attackers themselves was not determined. The judge decided to "return to that part of the case…[after] further investigation, particularly [after] the legal status of the entity which had assembled the Jehovah's Witnesses for their meeting on [the night of] October 17th of 1999" was decided.[117] The judge was here referencing the impending decision of the Georgian Supreme Court as to whether or not it would legally recognize the Jehovah's Witnesses Christian Organization as a religious association. Though seemingly a small detail, this was important because the Constitution of the Republic of Georgia "[prohibited] religious persecution and [recognized] equality for all regardless of religion, subject to considerations of public safety or health or the rights of others."[118] The state had this in mind. If it decided to grant the Jehovah's Witnesses the legal status of being a religion, it would be obligated to protect their rights under the law of the country. That would mean taking steps to prosecute their attackers – including Mkalavishvili. Expectedly, it did not do so – a decision that it maintained until it was ultimately reversed under mounting international pressure, nearly

114 Case of 97 Members of the Gldani Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses, 9.
115 Ibid., 9.
116 Ibid., 9.
117 Ibid., 9.
118 "Georgia," United States Department of State, https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/georgia/.

two decades later, in 2021.[119] Zurab Adeishvili, the chairman of Georgia's parliamentary legal committee at the time, voiced his concern with this decision. He said that "it encouraged extremist forces in [the] Georgian Orthodox Church to suppress religious minority groups."[120] Adeishvili's concerns quickly proved themselves to be well-founded. Just a few days after the ruling, the violence against Jehovah's Witnesses that had stopped for a brief moment during the trial had resumed. In 2001 alone, Jehovah's Witnesses were assaulted by mobs, police, and priests on at least forty separate occasions.[121]

When Mkalavishvili himself was indicted on minor charges that same year, he was not arrested and, in fact, continued to perform religious services at his church without interference by the authorities.[122] While there, he kept encouraging religious persecution and violence. In one interview from 2001, Mkalavishvili stated that "[he was] categorically [warning] the entire population of Georgia, and especially the representatives of the Jehovah's Witnesses sect, that they must not meet together and hold their Satanic meetings. Although [he] had been forbidden from going to see them as [he] did in the past to prevent their meetings, [he] was [declaring] publicly that although [he] would not appear, the members of [his] parish would. Starting [that day], terrible pogroms [were to] begin."[123] Mkalavishvili claimed that his supporters would do this because "they [had] been parachuted [sic.] by unsavory and anti-Christian foreign forces [seeking] to destroy Georgia. For that reason, [Jehovah's Witnesses] could no longer be tolerated" by Georgians.[124] This statement was not condemned by the government.

By 2001, it was clear that it was not just Mkalavishvili and his mob who supported the persecution of the Jehovah's Witnesses. The police, the judiciary, the government, and many of the Georgian people themselves all tacitly – or overtly – believed that what Mkalavishvili was doing was good for their country. Even the Georgian Orthodox Church, the insti-

119 Ibid.

120 "Religious Persecution in Georgia – How Much Longer."

121 Ibid.; "Memorandum to the U.S. Government on Religious Violence."

122 Jean-Christophe Peuch, "Georgia: Defrocked Priest Sentenced for Religious Violence," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, https://www.rferl.org/a/1057216.html.

123 Case of 97 Members of the Gldani Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses, 11.

124 Ibid., 11.

tution that had removed Mkalavishvili from the priesthood just a few years prior, was now supporting the use of legal and extralegal measures to combat the influence of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Following the seizure and impoundment of six tons of "sectarian" religious literature – mostly the New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures – the Office of the Patriarch of All Georgia released a statement claiming that "the distribution of [all] foreign religious literature should be banned."[125] Giorgi Andriadze, an official spokesman of the Georgian Orthodox Church, declared that Jehovah's Witnesses themselves were dangerous and should be banned from practicing their religion.[126] Even Patriarch Ilia II, the head of the Georgian Orthodox Church, cited the "growth of sects" in Georgia as a pretext for "closer cooperation between the Georgian Orthodox Church and the government" on religious matters.[127] As such, the Georgian Orthodox Church lobbied the government for "laws that would grant it special status and restrict the activities of missionaries from non-traditional religions" like the Jehovah's Witnesses.[128] It only achieved a partial success in this effort – the Georgian Constitution was modified to include one article stating that the "state recognizes the special role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Georgian history" in 1995 and another recognizing the "outstanding role of the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia in the history of Georgia…[affirming that] the relationship between the state of Georgia and the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia shall be determined by a constitutional agreement, which shall be in full compliance with the universally recognized principles and norms of international law in the area of human rights and freedoms" in 2002.[129]

125 The New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures is a translation of the Bible used by and for Jehovah's Witnesses; "Religious Persecution in Georgia – How Much Longer."

126 Ibid.

127 "Memorandum to the U.S. Government on Religious Violence."

128 It should be noted the aim of the Georgian Orthodox Church was not necessarily to subject the Jehovah's Witnesses to religious violence. Rather, it wanted to use state power and its own social and cultural influence to preserve its own status in public life. Sometimes, this meant coercing members of "sects" to rejoin them. Repeatedly, it emphasized that Jehovah's Witnesses had the "freedom to change their belief" and that attacks by people like Mkalavishvili would stop if they just rejoined the "flock." Thus, they neither condemned nor supported these attacks, as they saw them as effective coercion techniques; "Memorandum to the U.S. Government on Religious Violence."

129 "Constitution of Georgia," Article 8, https://matsne.gov.ge/en/document/view/30346.

Yet, the government's unwillingness to address the attacks in any meaningful way clearly violated the "universally recognized principles and norms" with which it claimed to comply.[130] For example, Georgia had adopted the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms just a few years prior, and in doing so, it made a formal commitment to upholding the convention's articles. One article of that convention – article ten – states that "everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers."[131] Yet, Georgia had stripped the Jehovah's Witnesses of their legal status, confiscated their literature, denied them the freedom of public assembly on multiple occasions, and let acts of violence against them go unpunished. Georgia had failed to deliver on its promise of guaranteeing basic human rights for its citizens.

The Rose Revolution of 2004 offered Georgia an opportunity to confront these failures.[132] The new president installed in its wake, Mikhail Saakashvili, was quick to voice his opposition to religious violence and discrimination. He said that "[those who] use the cross as a weapon to hit people on the head…[commit] the worst possible offense to Christ and religion. It is our duty to defend Christianity because Christianity is based on tolerance, not violence. It is based on love. These people are sowing hatred, extremism, and violence."[133] Of course, even in this critique, Saakash-

130 "Memorandum to the U.S. Government on Religious Violence in the Republic of Georgia."

131 "Religious Persecution in Georgia – How Much Longer."

132 The Rose Revolution of 2004 was the result of growing discontent with the Shevardnadze government for its anti-democratic tendencies, corruption, mismanagement of the economy, and isolation of the state on the international stage. The leader of the movement to depose Shevardnadze, Mikhail Saakashvili, was an American-educated lawyer who sought to right the wrongs of the previous administration by pursuing a slate of ambitious reforms with the backing and assistance of the United States and the European Union.

133 Here Saakashvili is invoking the Bible, of course, but also thousands of years of history of religious tolerance in Georgia. For most of its modern history, Georgia was understood to be one of the very few places in Europe where Muslims and Jews were tolerated alongside Christians. This really only changed in the late twentieth century with the country's independence from the Soviet Union; Ani Chkhikvadze, "Washington's Forgotten Golden Boy Is Trying for a Comeback in Georgia," Foreign Policy, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/11/05/mikheil-saakashvili-georgia-hunger-strike-washington-golden-boy/.

vili showed that he saw Georgia as a Christian country and Georgians as a Christian people. He appealed to Christian sensibilities with Christian language. This was a staple of his administration. He was an "adept spinner of patriotic myths" that revolved around the history and culture of the country – including Christianity and the Orthodox Church – who used religion to push through a slate of ambitious reforms.[134] Saakashvili changed the flag, chose a new national anthem, and amended the constitution to reflect his personal vision for the country. Each of these things emphasized the role of religion in Georgian public life. The flag now bore five crosses. The anthem now began with a proclamation that "our icon is the homeland [and] trust in God is our creed."[135] And despite many amendments, the constitution retained its reference to the "outstanding role of the…[Orthodox] Church in the history of Georgia" from 2002.[136] Even so, Saakashvili was not a religious nationalist by any means. He saw "Georgia as a state where minorities were full-fledged citizens."[137] Ani Chkhikvadze claims that "he removed ethnicity from national identification and gave other religious denominations the same rights as the dominant Georgian Orthodox Church. These steps [would later] cause a reaction from traditionalist groups, which would bring him down."[138]

Shortly after taking office, Saakashvili fired "80 to 90 percent of all policemen" in the country as a part of his larger effort to crack down on corruption.[139] One consequence of this was that it eliminated many of Mkalavishvili's sympathizers amongst law enforcement. The new police force, Saakashvili claimed, was "professionalizing" and therefore moving away from its old "uncivilized" approach to law enforcement – something that he said included a policy of responsiveness to crimes and reports thereof. This culminated in the re-opening of a formal investigation into Mkalavishvili's attacks on Jehovah's Witnesses. Mkalavishvili "maintained [his] innocence throughout the investigation [and assumed] that the prosecution would not be able to get any proof [of his crimes]" because of the "climate

134 Ibid.
135 "Georgia," https://nationalanthems.info/ge.htm.
136 "Constitution of Georgia," Article 8.
137 Ani Chkhikvadze, "Washington's Forgotten Golden Boy."
138 Ibid.
139 Robert Siegel, "Georgia's National Police Corruption Project," NPR, September 15, 2005, https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4849472.

of intimidation" that discouraged witnesses who had suffered from his attacks from speaking out.[140] After all, many of the people who could testify against Mkalavishvili were present when he had last stormed into the courtroom. They remembered the frightening language, the open threats, and the brutality of their attackers. And there was no assurance that those things would not happen again. Saakashvili had only just come to power, after all. His chances of being deposed – though certainly low – were not zero. But the trial pressed on. Compelling evidence against Mkalavishvili – including the interview that he had participated in on the night of October 17th of 1999 – sealed his fate. On charges of inciting violence against Georgia's religious minorities, he received a sentence of six years in jail.[141]

For many opponents of Mkalavishvili, this was welcomed, but not enough. Human rights defender Giorgi Khutsishvili recognized this. He argued that "without strong signals from politicians that religious violence is unacceptable, mild sentences like this one [would] remain the norm" for the foreseeable future.[142] Being able to trust the government to deliver "justice for the victims of the violence" was also necessary to him.[143] Otherwise, society would continue to think that "violence in the name of Orthodoxy" was acceptable.[144] Public Defender Sozar Subari affirmed this claim, suggesting that "although acts of violence against people who were not members of the Georgian Orthodox Church had ceased, threats continued and non-Georgian Orthodox religious communities remained unable to build places of worship" or freely express their beliefs in public without fearing for their safety.[145] Subari was insistent that the problem of religious violence – and certainly religious persecution – had not yet been solved. A strong bias towards Orthodox Christianity could still be found in the institutions, laws, policies, and attitudes of the country. Even if religious persecution was not nearly as volatile an issue as it had been in the past, Subari knew that it was still there.

140 Felix Corley, "Two Leaders of Religious Violence Finally Sentenced."
141 Jean-Christophe Peuch, "Georgia: Defrocked Priest Sentenced."
142 Felix Corley, "How Should Religious Violence Legacy Be Overcome," Forum 18 News, January 27, 2005, https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=499.
143 Ibid.
144 Ibid.
145 Ibid.

This sentiment was echoed by Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili of the Evangelical Baptist Church. Once described by Mkalavishvili as "the greatest threat to our [Orthodox] faith" because of his willingness to embrace interfaith dialogue, Songulashvili expressed that combatting religious intolerance was "a matter of justice and of nation-building" that was of great concern to Georgia.[146] He said that if the country did not take action, the problem would "still be festering five years on" and become even harder to solve.[147] To address this, he argued that it was imperative that it needed to be made known "how this violence started, how it developed, and who organized it. This [was] the only way [that] the terrible legacy of the country could be overcome."[148]

But Songulashvili felt that the problem went much deeper than most people thought. He argued that Mkalavishvili and his associates were only "small fries" who "carried out attacks on others' orders" and that the real instigators of the violence had yet to face justice.[149] Allowing the public view of religious violence to remain fixed on people like Mkalavishvili would leave them with the idea that "it was only those who actually carried out the attacks who were responsible" when this was, in fact, not true.[150] He claimed that "a [real] investigation would [almost certainly] end up at the Georgian Orthodox Patriarchate…[and] the senior political leadership."[151] To this day, he maintains that "law-enforcement ministers, the entire government, and even President Eduard Shevardnadze" were involved in varying capacities.[152]

Georgian Orthodox Church spokesperson Zurab Tskhovrebadze denied that the institution had backed the violence. He claimed that it "didn't take part in the violence" and that "the vast majority of attacks had been carried out by Mkalavishvili."[153] Yet, numerous witnesses were able to

146 Felix Corley, "How Should Religious Violence Legacy Be Overcome."; Wendy Ryan, "International Baptist Minister Comes under Fire," Baptist Press, May 30, 2002, https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/international-baptist-minister-comes-under-fire/.

147 Felix Corley, "How Should Religious Violence Legacy Be Overcome."

148 Ibid.

149 Ibid.

150 Ibid.

151 Ibid.

152 Ibid.

153 Ibid.

"identify serving clergy of the Patriarchate as having personally organized and participated in violent physical attacks" on religious minorities.[154] He also blamed "certain political forces" for organizing the violence – though he declined to speculate on how far people like Shevardnadze might have been involved.[155] Voices from within the Georgian Orthodox Church who disagreed with this analysis were censured. Father Basil Kobakhidze, for example, was "suspended from performing priestly functions by the [Church] for opposing [its] hostility to other Christian denominations [and questioning its role] in violent physical attacks against them."[156] He believed that "sermons full of xenophobia, extremism and nationalist ideology" were promoted by the Church to disastrous effect.[157] They had radicalized people like Mkalavishvili – the "small fries," as Songulashvili called them – but the religious officials who encouraged and delivered such sermons would not accept responsibility for doing so.

Therefore, Kobakhidze – like many other dissidents – concluded that "dozens of people, including priests of the Georgian Orthodox Church, should be on trial" for sowing the seeds of hate.[158] Even the Saakashvili government, Kobakhidze said, was "merely [a continuation] of the religious nationalism [seen under] Shevardnadze."[159] Saakashvili's unwillingness to directly challenge the Orthodox Church, he claimed, only "[added] strength to those who [wanted] to silence critics against the church leadership."[160]

Moreover, acts of solidarity with the Orthodox Church like "[attending] a lavish religious service that marked the inauguration of Georgia's largest religious building, the Holy Trinity Cathedral in Tbilisi" and "[urging] the media to show restraint in covering church affairs" after a group of Georgian seminarians spoke out against the church demonstrated that Saakashvili was unwilling – or incapable of – pushing back on the influence of the Church and its increasingly reactionary policies.[161]

154 Ibid.
155 Ibid.
156 Forum 18 News, "Two Leaders of Religious Violence Finally Sentenced."
157 Ibid.
158 Ibid.
159 Ibid.
160 Forum 18 News, "Two Leaders of Religious Violence Finally Sentenced."
161 Ibid.

I would not contest that Songulashvili and Kobakhidze were right to pinpoint a deeper cause for the religious intolerance in Georgia. I would, however, argue that while studying individuals and institutions can help us better understand this intolerance, it cannot be fully grasped without acknowledging its deeper roots. It clearly came from an even deeper source. Therefore, I propose that the construction of Georgian national identity around Orthodox Christianity as it was articulated by Gamsakhurdia and later codified institutionally by Shevardnadze had disastrous effects on the politics of inclusivity in Georgia. It was, from the start, a vision of national identity which was deeply exclusionary and encouraging of violence against dissenters. As Georgia sought to reconstruct and rejuvenate its national identity in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union – under which both religion and nationalism had been repressed – its political leaders drew on the sentiment that Orthodox Christianity was "intertwined [with] what it meant to be Georgian" and used it to legitimize their regimes.[162]

The legacies of these political leaders – especially Gamsakhurdia and Shevardnadze – continue to echo through Georgian politics today. Orthodox Christianity regularly compels intolerance against "others" in the country and the Georgian Orthodox Church uses its power to acquire further unique privileges and exert significant influence on state policies – especially those concerning moral and religious issues. Expectedly, these things have caused difficulties for Georgia's minorities – many of whom have faced discriminatory legal and extra-legal practices at the hands of the state, institutions, and individuals alike in the name of God and country.

This has recently come to the fore, as Georgia has been scrutinized by the United States and the European Union for its poor treatment of ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities.[163] Such treatment is still often motivated by the country's religious institutions and exclusionary understandings of national identity. If Georgia does not identify this issue – and then hopefully solve it – it will harm the livelihood of its citizens and risk further isolation on the international stage. Reckoning with the problematic elements of Georgia's past – and even with some aspects of the understandings of nationhood articulated by more positively viewed figures

162 Elizabeth Shogren, "Nationalist Ideals Drive Georgian's Kremlin Battle."

163 "Two Leaders of Religious Violence Finally Sentenced but What about the Others," Forum 18 News, https://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=503.

like Ilia Chavchavadze – is necessary if Georgia is to move forward. That process begins by understanding that the modern history of the country is rooted in a vision of national identity that is deeply exclusionary.

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