

The Fest “Alavrdoba” and Traditions of Interreligious Dialogue in Georgia

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A general overview of major characteristics of the religious life in Georgia during the last three decades reveals its shift from the repressed and socially not-contextual forms to the forms of religious nationalism. The beginning of 90s might be considered as a conventional border. This is a time when the country gained independence and the sense of fear paralyzing religious life even during a relatively liberal period of Communistic regime had disappeared.

Fathers and supporters of the Soviet ideology could state that neither religion existed in their countries, since it would mean well-organized and socially active religious movements. Religious feelings urged the individuals to spiritual inquiries. It might sound strange, but to some extent it was a golden age for a religious life itself. Completely isolated from all social processes, it got the chance to direct all its contents inside; free from missionary competition it could direct all the attention towards its live origins. All of us, regardless of our religious faiths, were craving for all means to satisfy our inner searches; therefore, the borders among different creeds had only somehow formal character. We knew that we should have saved the most important thing one has – eternal and adventurous spirit. No matter how hard Bolsheviks tried to imprison it in the body of Homo Sovieticus, our mission was to save it.

What is important is that inter-religious dialogue was not an ideological demand of that time, but a necessary condition for the religion and thus the essence of human being. In 1962 Georgian Orthodox Church joined World Council of Churches and Conference of European Churches. In 1979-81 the Patriarchy of Georgia organized theological discussions between Georgian Baptists and Orthodox Christians. I attended those discussions and can confirm a positive attitudes existing between the sides. There were not just theological discussions but dialogue on salvation of a spiritual life.

Theodor Dostoevsky, in one of his short novels – “Funny Man’s Dream” – describes how evil penetrates the world of chastity, and how love is substituted by jealousy and mistrust. Religious life during the Soviet period was not untainted for sure; interreligious relations were not completely pastoral either, though the repressions from the Soviet authorities created the picture, which gave us the ground to make such analogy.

If we want to describe briefly the reasons for the changes, we shall mention the emergence of a religious market as well. Those new religious organizations possessed the technologies of the religious marketing. For orthodox believers the notion of market and free competition was incompatible with the notion of religion. Religion, the “home of truth”, the truth articulated doctrinally and institutionally could not be the part of a market competition. If we cite Mark Juergensmeyer, here we encounter such concept of institutionalization which might be a precondition for a religious nationalism and religious conflicts³⁸.

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³⁸ Mark Juergensmeyer. *The New Cold War?. Religious Nationalism Confronts the Secular State.* University of California Press, 1993. p.178

The general background of religious fundamentalism is as follows: If religion is a home of the truth then it should be the only legitimate authority. Any kind of different opinion shall be considered as a cosmic conspiracy against the truth. As the rule, the idea of Masonic conspiracy imported from Russia undergoes further fertilization on local grounds, and sometimes receives quite absurd connotations: besides non-traditional religious groups and NGOs protecting religious minorities, Catholics and even Muslims are also blamed for participation in this conspiracy. It has become possible to sanction any kind of religious violence using different religious texts. As Rene Girard calls it, metaphysical and mimetic symbolism of religious violence comes into force³⁹.

In the beginning of 90s religious nationalism was a part of cultural nationalism, though after the middle of the 90s it became a separate ideology. First of all it was a strong social demand generated by the adaptation crisis. Several generations of the Soviet people lived isolated from the outer world and naturally, their "return to the history" was accompanied with a cultural shock. Secondly, the extremely corrupted secular authority of the country could not do anything to improve the economic and psychological state of the people. Orthodox religion, the only faith for the 80% of Georgian population has become the symbol of salvation.

The contradiction among different religious groups was not only growing because of Orthodox Church and its claims of being religious legatee in Georgian reality. Here we should also mention the occupational motivation of some nontraditional religious movements striving to establish themselves. Everything was strengthening the fundamentalist feelings.

Political parties and governmental structures rarely took time to think of new forms of a religious co-existence. The Government considers legitimate accommodation of religions only when situation is becoming too stressed. Since the 90s, the issue of the religions factor has been mainly an instrument to get the authority for most of the politicians.

In the second half of the 90s, a secular educational system became the object of constant attack. More often, the request to declare the Orthodoxy as the state religion was heard. This idea gained a huge support in the society. The sociological survey conducted in 1999 revealed that 57% of respondents supported the idea to base the State on the Orthodox principles. Among students 62% were in favor of the same idea. I dare to say that this idea was imported as well. It is a widely known fact that Metropolitan Kiril of Smolensk and Kaliningrad who exerts a great influence on the Russian Church once declared that governance of judges described in the Bible is the most suitable condition for every orthodox country.

To understand history, the leaders of religious nationalism don't use the terminology of liberalism and democracy, but interpretations of Huntington's theory on the clash of civilizations as interpreted by a Russian geopolitical theorist Alexander Dugin, who describes it as an idea of alternative development of Eurasian civilization. There were also attempts to connect ideologically Orthodoxy and communism, and Stalin many times has been declared as one of the true Orthodox Christians who saved

³⁹ Rene Girard. *Violence and the Sacred*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974. p.36.

Russia from Jews dictatorship. In the end of 90s Genadi Zuganov the leader of the communist party declared communism as a social doctrine of Orthodoxy.

We view, as one of the most dramatic and symbolic forms of religious violence, the fact that Protestants and Catholics were requested to leave the Alaverdi Episcopal temple. The point is that Alaverdi Temple has a very important symbolic meaning. It was built in the VI century A.C. Inside its yard there is a small Muslim chapel. It has been the place for one of the most famous religious festivals starting on September 23 and lasting three weeks. For centuries it was the place where Christians, Muslims and pagans were gathered. Market and various sport competitions were organized and thus the tradition of a religious co-existence was created.

Cultural identity, as an imperative, in Caucasus has been placed in a very particular frame; Caucasus due to its religious and ethnic diversities, permanently faced the task of forming a common communication space. Religious fest of "Alaverdoba" was a very interesting case of such a common communicational space.

This cathedral isn't the only place for such meetings and dialogues. There are also a few worship places with primitive buildings in Georgia, where till the middle of the 90s of last century, even in the times of Chechen war, Muslim Chechens arrived from Russia and conducted religious rituals together with Christian Georgians.

In my opinion, such cases create the prefigurations of co-existence of cultures and religions which in future must guarantee peace in Caucasus.

Several times through mass media I put forward the idea of regeneration of Alaverdi multi-confessional games. However, neither businessmen nor politicians expressed interest.

After the November events of 2003 the idea of a secular state has been rehabilitated in Georgia. Though I think, the Georgian government still does not have a specific religious policy. But still the situation is changing. This fact gives me grounds to hope that Georgian society will manage to pass the phase of a religious nationalism without too much pain, and we could meet each other on Alaverdi inter-religious games some day.