

Religion for Peaceful Coexistence: Case of Georgia

Ketevan Khutsishvili and Rozeta Gujejiani

Abstract

In the heterogeneous societies the great importance is gaining the creation of system of peaceful societal coexistence. This can be reached through strengthening the meeting points between the representatives of various groups. The long-term mutual relations between the traditional religious communities in the Caucasus have been developed during the centuries. In conditions of positive or negative stereotypes, the mutual adaptation basically proceeded by a peaceful way. Culture as an adoptive and changeable system is progressing according to the historic-cultural contexts. The changes and transformations can be caused by the various factors. The influences and impacts are evident especially among the cultures, which were existed or exist side by side in the same physical and temporal space. These overlaps were a reason of formation of the certain shared practices. The forms of practices are various and they are changing under the influence of the processes going on within the society. The natural trend of finding the meeting points or trying to turn to such milestones even the disintegration factors is characteristic to the multicultural, mosaic cultures. In Georgia such points among the others appeared to be the shared religious practices.

Key Words: Shared sacred sites, religion, peaceful coexistence, Georgia.

Georgia is located in the central and western part of the South Caucasus, between the Caucasus Range from the north and the Lesser Caucasus Mountains from the south and the Black Sea from the west. The countries bordering Georgia on the south and southwest are the Republic of Armenia and Republic of Turkey, on the north and east the Russian Federation and the Republic of Azerbaijan. Georgia is situated on the crossroads of the geopolitical and socio-cultural boundaries of the bipolar West-East and North-South axes. Historically, during the certain time-periods Georgia was the political, economic and cultural center of the region. The representatives of various ethnic, linguistic and confessional groups have used to live here. The active political and economical relations to the neighbouring or remote regions were followed by the

various kinds of cultural influences. The rapid changes taken place since XIX century in all terms has even more deepened the cultural, linguistic and religious pluralism (see Khutsishvili 2004).

The different religious ideas and worldviews were familiar to the Georgian society. The mutual relations between the so-called traditional religious communities (Georgian Orthodox Church, Catholic Church, Gregorian Church, Jewish group, Islamic group) have been developed during the centuries (see Papuashvili 2002). In conditions of positive or negative stereotypes, the mutual adaptation basically proceeded by a peaceful way. In spite of the fact that around Georgia on extents of the centuries there has been passed several religious wars, Georgia became an example of peaceful coexistence of various confessional groups. That became possible by the mutual influences and adaptation of several everyday practices.

Georgia is one of the oldest Christian countries, which adopted Christianity as a state religion in 4th Century (Javakhishvili 1979, 165-209). The majority of the Georgian population is Orthodox Christian. According to the last survey carried out in 2014 the religious picture is the following: Orthodox Christians - 83.4%; Muslims – 10.7%; Adherents of Armenian Apostolic Church – 2.9%; Catholics – 0.5%; Jehovah's Witnesses - 0.3%; Yezidis – 0.2%; Protestants – 0.07%; Jews – 0.04%; others 1.4%; Atheists – 0.5% (Census 2014). The long-term mutual relations between the so-called traditional religious communities for the region have been developed during the centuries and impacted the cultural practices.

Culture is a system (Geertz 1973), which is not static but adoptive and changeable. The changes and transformations can be caused by the various factors. In any case the influences and impacts are evident especially among the cultures, which were existed or exist side by side in the same physical and temporal stage of development. These overlaps are a reason of formation of the certain shared practices. The forms of practice are various and they are changing under the influence of the processes going on in the society. The important factor is also the form of communication. Communication is the precondition for the existence of the society generally and its further development. On one hand it is highly important to transmit the knowledge and on the other hand it is vitally necessary to have the social connections and an informational influence by the help of direct or indirect contacts. As such contacts can be considered the meeting, direct exchange or the creation of the indirect connections by the use of the various media means.

Communication is an element of culture, which exists in all circumstances within or between the societies. It receives a special importance in the poly-ethnic or poly-confessional societies, as the maintenance of the societal unity and the conditions for the peaceful coexistence and development turns to be dependent on the vectors of communication. The Caucasus, including Georgia, is one of the quite diverse regions in the world taking into consideration the ethnic, linguistic or religious situation. Throughout the centuries in relatively small territory there were used to live together the representatives of the different ethno-cultural groups. This caused the emergence of the systems of peaceful coexistence, which served to put together various values, interests and needs.

The systems of socio-cultural regulations were supporting the construction of the environment for competition and cooperation. In the traditional societies of the Caucasus the huge range of the everyday realities in the spheres of governing, social relations, economic or religious being was oriented on peacemaking.

In some cases such conflict reasoning structural factors as: specialization, dependence on each other, common resources, authority interrelations, status connections etc. were used as a factors for supporting the peace. This was possible by the use of the communicational channels existed among the Caucasians and those cultural features, which were causing the construction of the values and norms which were if not identical than similar in some senses. Those similar values were expressed in common rites of hospitality, artificial kinship, friendship rites etc. The shared sacred sites, religious rituals or holidays and the bazaars, also supported the peaceful cooperation.

Religion is unifying the humans around the common symbols, values and norms. Religious doctrines and rituals are forming the foundation for “right/correct behavior”, which on its hand gives an opportunity of social organization. Religion is one of the sources for setting the moral and emotional connections to the others.

Societies are using the religious rhetoric and views for strengthening the cultural norms. Religious systems and organizations in any case are the major actors of public being. Their activities and forms of expression, if not entirely, are highly influencing the being and development tendencies of the societies. By examining the various functions of religion, can be stated that religion is a conservative force within a society. In a general sense religions support the status quo by keeping people in line through supernatural sanctions, revealing social conflict, and providing explanations

for unfortunate events. Moreover, sometimes through both philosophical convictions and political interpretations, have tended to retard social change. Following this process the nature of religiosity itself appears to have changed in all societies over time. But there are some religious interactions that are quite stable in this sense and among them the one of the oldest mainstays of worshiping practice – to worship the sacred sites and carry out the rituals of scarification and offering (Khutsishvili 2021, 240).

The practice of ritual slaughtering of animals was used as a mean of appeasing a god or gods or changing the course of nature. It also served a social or economic function in those cultures where the edible portions of the animal were distributed among those attending the sacrifice for consumption. Animal sacrifice has turned up in almost all cultures and is still practiced nowadays in many cultures and societies. It seems that such similarities in understanding of the communicative channels between the divinities and the humans lay in ground of easy adaption of the various elements of ritual practices. This similarity reasoned also adaption of the spaces, considered to be sacred for the representatives of the various ethno-cultural and confessional groups. There are several places throughout Georgia, where the Moslems and the Christians are carrying out their religious rituals sometimes even in the same time and side by side or mutually. The most important sites are alongside the Caucasian range, as this is the area of bordering south and north Caucasians. The whole system of the sacred sites and shrines constructed on the tops of the mountains and at the passes was actually the main determining factor for the meeting and rapprochement of the population of the mountainous regions of the Caucasus. Such sits are Lomisa shrine, Anatori and Khakhmati (joint shrine of Christians and Muslims) (Bukhrashvili 2004, 11-12). Such sites have been emerged in the lowlands as well, in the areas shared by the representatives of different ethno-religious groups (e.g. Kartli region in Eatrn lowlands of Georgia etc.). Some of these sacred places are not used any more as the shared places in practice, but the cultural memory of the group is still maintaining the narratives regarding such communication (“we were going there together”, “it is the patron of our district and doesn’t matter who owns the place Georgians or others”, “the god is common for all of us and his house should also be common” etc. this are the statement of the interlocutors). Both Christians and Muslims alike went to the shrines devoted to the saints famous for their miracles to get help from them (Abakelia 2017, 78).

One of such places is Khakhmati sacred site (Jvari or Khati in Georgian). It is situated in north-east Georgian Mountainous part – Khevsureti, in village Khakhmati and is considered to be the patron of the Khevsureti communities (see. Bardavelidze 1982, 69-80). The Chechens were also used to come to pray in Khakhmati. The ritual was consisting the offerings to the divinity and prays, including the joint fest. Another example is Anatori shrine, situated two kilometers northwest from Shatili (Khevsureti) (see. Bardavelidze 1982, 69-80). Until the beginning of the 20th century Moslem Chechens were also praying in this shrine. According the narratives the offerings brought by them was more highly valued than the ones brought by the Christians. Anatori is located on the crossroads of two valleys and the roads coming from Chechnia, Ingushetia, Dagestan, and other part of Georgia -Tusheti, Kartl-Kakheti are meeting here. This fact made it more functional.

According to the ethnographic and historical data the habit of sharing the sacred sites by the Christian and Moslem groups was widely spread. As some scholars are arguing these kinds of practices have deep roots going to the pre-Christian period. It is considered that it might be a result of the common cultural substrata. Among shared realities the habit of sharing of the sacred sites was widely spread in the everyday life of the Caucasians. The certain political, social and economic factors are reasoning the adoption of some cultural realities by the different groups. In the case of shared sacred sites this is highly depended on the peculiar context. The contextual meanings are causing the transformation of space into place (Setha Low 1996, 861-879). On its hand the places are providing the meanings, which are easing the intergroup communication. In those regions of Georgia, where the Christians and Moslems are neighboring, sacred sites are serving for both groups as worshiping places. In some sites the rituals were held together, in the others in different days. Especially interesting is to consider the processes of transformation of such practices under the influence of current factors.

The post-soviet society after living in conditions of fighting atheism in the mass order has addressed to religious roots and the religious representations have appeared as a system of values playing a major role in construction of ethno-cultural identity. Thus, the shared realities appear not to be desirable and they seemed to be under the threat of disappearance. But the certain contexts are demanding the existence of shared ethnographic realities. The contemporary processes are having impact on the religiosity and the changes are traced throughout the last decades.

When certain societies are experiencing high levels of stress and strain and the conservative functions of religion cannot hold them together new practices are founded. Some societies call for a return to the better days of the past, others seek to establish a completely new social order (Wallace: 1966). The religiosity of the certain groups is trying to be defined in new forms. All these forms of religiosity are explicitly displayed and played out. At the same time there are some hidden practices, or rather implicit practices, more individual in sense of concentrating on the smaller groups and practiced within the group. In spite of the complicated picture in general the small-scaled societies are quite conservative in this sense and their everyday practices, which are supporting their societal unity, are deeply rooted in their lives.

Almost all shared sacred sites in Georgia are the “holy places” from the pre-Christian period, later turned into the spaces for Christian (Orthodox) Churches and used as the sacred sites by the all groups living in neighborhood. The religious holidays of various groups have been celebrated in the same space. During the Soviet period the open celebrations were forbidden or appeared not to be possible because of fragmentation the societal scale. Mainly there were celebrated some considered to be the main religious holidays at homes and some sacred places, like Easter, which did the Muslim communities also celebrate by colouring the eggs at home, praying and visiting the same sacred places and cemeteries.

This kind of practices were the reasons for punishment in the early soviet times, but then later it became the subject for making fun on so-called “old fashioned”, “closed-minded” views and practices from the official point of discourse. At the same time as the religious belonging was considered as an important marker of ethnicity and of identity in general, religion became the spiritual base for even the political/national movements. This process led to an increase in beliefs and religious ideas became popular. Thus, the parallel realities have been constructed in the same space. In spite of official discourse, the population, especially the rural population was living in such “second”, “other” realities, as those of officially declared and supported ones did not overlap their everyday practices. This is an explanation for maintenance of really unique in some sense everyday practices including the religious practices. And especially the shared ones that gave foundation to the syncretic ethnographic realities like the shared public spaces for the representatives not only of various ethnic but also the religious groups. In some places contemporary practices are proved. It must be stressed not less important side of such practices – its unifying

function within the small scaled societies. Exactly in such small scaled societies are practiced nowadays the common celebration of the religious holidays, which are normatively Orthodox, but accepted by the Moslems as well, like the holiday of Saint George, or vice versa, like Novruz Bayram etc.

The most spread practice as it was already mentioned is to have the shared sacred sites. The representatives of the Moslem and Orthodox communities use mostly the Orthodox Churches or even the ruins and remains of such to held the religious rituals. The rituals of slaughtering the animals are the rituals, which are common for the all-ethno-cultural groups living in Georgia, thus the adoption of the place where the same ritual is held was quite natural. The Moslems of Georgia were saying that the sacred site is in any case sacred site, where the humans should worship the god and if they have no mosque the church can serve as a house of God.

In Kartli, in the districts populated by Moslems (in spite of the being Shiia, or Sunni) they were visiting the sacred sites, carrying out the scarification rituals, praying and switching the candles. In the village Khatissopeli (Bolnisi district) on the territory of the church the celebration of the St. George day was an important part of the religious calendar of both Moslem and Orthodox communities. The Moslems were visiting the site on 22 November and on the next day 23 November the Orthodox believers were coming. The ritual part was identical: circling the church with the lightened candles, kissing its corners, going inside the building and praying there, bringing the animal (mainly sheep) and slaughtering it in the yard, cooking it and sharing directly on the place. The prying texts were also almost identical and the narratives regarding the healing craft of the place and Patron-protector St. George were same for the both groups. The church is functioning, there is a priest who tolerates the visits of the Moslems and their activities, stating that the holly place is for each human and they can express their devotion in the form, which is traditional for them.

These rites were usually practiced till 1990-ies. Later the general disorder and the political changes have influenced the everyday practices. Until the hard times of 1990-ies the religious holidays were the reasons for trade as well. The bazaars were founded for a period of celebrations around the sacral sites and they had also played a great part in establishment of peaceful friendly relations between the various ethnic and confessional groups. These holidays and bazaars were held until the middle of the

1990-ies. But after the late 1990-ies it appeared impossible to maintain the contacts further, as the rapid political changes have influenced the traditional mode of life.

Considering the dynamics of the last decades in Georgia, it is evident how great the religious factor is influencing the processes. This is not surprising because of several objective and subjective reasons. The religion, as a strong mobilizing mean frequently is used during the political battle. The most interesting correlation of religion and politics can be observed in the former Soviet space, where during the Soviet period religion was oppressed and on the one hand pushed out of the public or political spheres, but at the same time used in certain ways to channel the emotions of the several groups of the society to the desirable directions. Extremely interesting situation has been constructed in the South Caucasian Region. The situation in Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia was in some terms not similar, but in some points quite comparable.

The role of religion has increased especially in those poly-ethnic societies where the ethnic groups belong to various confessions. During the mutual influence of different cultures, the reciprocal relation between religions gets a main role and the public stability becomes real dependent from the freedom of religious expression and degree of cooperation between confessions. Binary opposition “we - they”, existing in poly-ethnic societies, together with the social-political problems, are aggravating the confessional tensions. Though, the opposite process is also possible, when the religious identity becomes the precondition of the consent between different ethnic groups.

The growth of the religious factor is global process. In differences from a beginning of the XX century, when the crisis of religion has accepted steady character, in the beginning of the XXI century there are going on the opposite processes. Under the influence of immanent laws of development of a society, the religious factor has turned to decisive element of security of confessions, ethno-cultures, and states and, in general, of the whole world.

The intensive process of globalization from the middle of XX century has rendered definite influence on the ethnic cultures and has called the applicable opposite reaction as localization. There are changing the systems of values, correlation between elite and national cultures, the problems of cultural distinction, subculture, counterculture, multiculturalism, ethnocentrism and existences of global culture are arising, these tasks are mostly important in connection with the rather

contradictorily process of changing of the industrial epoch by so-called informational epoch. It seems that religion turns into one of the major factors in this process, and together with the territory and nationality it should become the basis for definition of identity and, accordingly, will influence a direction of formation of the future society. The religious belonging can be as well as the unifying and disconnecting factor. The general consequent of globalization – modernization is the religious diversity with attendant processes. Especially important in such conditions is the conventional religion, while as a rule it expresses national identity and any change in relation to conventional religion damages a natural line of ethno-cultural reproduction.

The religion, from the anthropological point of view, is a phenomenon of culture, which mirrors the perceptions of humans influenced by a cultural context. For anthropologists it is essential not installation of divine true, but rather analysis of the appearances that are religious or are believed to be religious, through the light of an actual context of the facts. In the anthropological theory of religion, the culture is a significant determinant of religion. The function of religion consists in the satisfaction of practical social needs and creation of fundamentals for protection of personal spiritual security or unity. Connection between religion and problem of identity in this case is essential. The identity is the process of formation of meanings on the basis of the cultural definitions. It shapes the interests and values around of the experience and consequently has huge importance for the person and the group. The ethno-cultural identity is a daily practice and historical process. At the same time, the ethno-cultural identity is immanently, though not necessarily variable. The external and internal processes operated on the personal, interactional and collective levels shape it. The ethno-cultural identity gains the special importance in the poly-ethnic societies, where the cultural differentiation is great. The different cultures affect each other and the mutual interaction of religions becomes more significant.

In the contemporary Georgia the change or flexibility/or rather unstability of the political vectors were highly influencing the development of religious relations. In Georgia the large influence on the public stability, the integration and cooperation between ethno-cultures and confessions is rendered by the religion of dominant nation - Orthodoxy, which has preserved its place and importance in the everyday life. The exclusive part of Orthodoxy determined by the constitution, became the legal basis for the constitutional agreement between the Georgian state and Orthodox Church of Georgia made on 14 October 2002 (Matsne 2002). In the last decades there cannot be

mentioned any important public theme, when discussing around the interested parties would not address to authority of the church, proceeding from its influence on a public opinion. The church tries to act only as a facilitator. This position of church has a large importance not only for the inner-ethnic integration of the Georgians, but also for preservation of the ethno-confessional and public stability in the country.

The processes proceeding in the post-soviet space, including Georgia confirm, that in a poly-ethnic society mutual relation between ethno-confessional groups and even between the separate members of these groups, the traditions of cooperation and public-legal practice depend on the set of such factors, as tolerance and intolerance, acceptance and ignorance, knowledge and lack of information. From this point of view, for the Georgian society the variety of ways of development of processes is characteristic. On the one hand, there are available amplifying tendencies to mutual cooperation and dialogue for development of united state interests, and on the other hand, weight of negative attitudes displays the disintegration and religious intolerance. Thus, the high level of tolerance coexists together with the mistrust and destinations. The several interest groups often use this situation and the integration processes sometimes are interrupted and latent tensions are coming to light. In such conditions the century long traditions and rites are turning into the real tools for keeping not only the peaceful co-existence but also through the common practices to share the cultural spaces and diminish the distance and mistrust between the representatives of various ethno-cultural groups. One of such rites till nowadays is remaining the practice of having the shared sacred sites, where all elements of sacral (by J. Harrison) - exhibition, drama and instruction, are shared in this case because of the temporal and physical frames of coexistence of the Orthodox-Moslem communities. Exactly such shared practices were one of the most meaningful and vital millstones in peaceful coexistence in the poly-ethnic societies.

References

1. Abakelia Nino (in Georgian)
2. Bardavelidze Vera (1982), Traditional Cult Monuments of East Mountainous Georgia. Khevsureti, vol. 2, Tbilisi, Metsniereba. (in Georgian)

3. Bukhrashvili Paata (2004), Bronze Age “Standards” (?) and Insignias (?) of Khevisberi from Upper Zgidi (Digori), in journal Amirani vol. 10, Tbilisi, pp. 7-21(in Georgian)
4. Census (2014) National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2014 General Population Census Results
<https://www.geostat.ge/ka/modules/categories/739/demografiuli-da-sotsialuri-makhasiateblebi>
 Geertz Clifford (1973), The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz. Basic Books, Inc., Publishers. New York
5. Javakhishvili Ivane (1979), Works in 12 volumes, vol. 1. Tbilisi TSU publishing house (in Georgian)
6. Khutsishvili Ketevan (2004), Changing of religious situation and the problem of public security in modern Georgia, Tbilisi, (in Georgian)
7. Khutsishvili Ketevan (2021), Georgia – the case of intercultural relations, in Ethnocultural diversity and intercultural communication in Georgia, proceedings, Tbilisi
8. Low M. Setha (1996), Spatializing Culture: The Social Production and Social Construction of Public Space in Costa Rica, in American Ethnologist, Vol. 24 No.4 (Nov. 1996) pp. 861-879
9. Matsne (2002), Legislative herald of Georgia, 2002 22/10/2002, Parliament of Georgia <https://matsne.gov.ge/ka/document/view/41626?publication=0>
10. Papuashvili Nugzar (2002), World Religions in Georgia, Tbilisi, Liberty Institute, (in Georgian)
11. Wallace A: Wallace A., Religion an anthropological view, 1966