

**Country of Origin Information**

**RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN GEORGIA**

**REPORT**

**December 2006**

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## **PRELIMINARY NOTE**

This document focuses on the situation of religious minorities in Georgia as of December 2006. It aims at providing objective and up-to-date information to parties involved in the determination of asylum claims filed by applicants from Georgia (Georgia being their country of origin). The information provided was compiled from publicly available sources on one hand, and interviews with local representatives of religious minorities and civil society on the other hand. It does not necessarily reflect UNAG's or UNHCR's opinions. A list of all source documents cited in footnotes is at the end of this document.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The vast majority of the population of Georgia (83.9 percent) belong to the Georgian Orthodox Church, the latter being an important part of Georgian national identity and history since the fourth century A.D. Two other main religious groups are Muslims (9.9 percent) and Apostolic Armenians (3.9 percent). While these groups, along with Catholics and Jews, have long formed part of Georgia's religious landscape, there are a number of other Protestant or reform movements that have either recently appeared or become more apparent since its independence in 1991. These religious groups are widely referred to as "non-traditional faiths."

Georgia's legislative framework provides guarantees for freedom of religion. Georgia is also a signatory party to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1950 European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>1</sup> which enshrine the principle of religious freedom. The independence of the Church from the State is enshrined in the Constitution, which nevertheless recognizes "the special importance of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Georgian history". In April 2005, a new Law on Education was passed by the Parliament that reformed the course on religion introduced in schools in 1996, which gradually evolved into proselytism of Georgian Orthodoxy. The two most important legal issues regarding religion currently appear to be the legal status of religious groups and the return of churches that were confiscated during the Soviet period. In April 2005, the Parliament passed some amendments to the Civil Code allowing religious groups to register with the Ministry of Justice as associations or foundations, but religious minorities are widely dissatisfied with these amendments. They refuse to register as an association of private law, as opposed to religious entities of public law. Before April 2005, there was no legal mechanism for religious groups to gain legal status except for the Georgian Orthodox Church, which signed a constitutional agreement with the Georgian state in 2002 that defined the relationship between the two. Through this Constitutional Agreement, the Georgian Orthodox Church has been granted some privileges that are not available to other religious groups. There is no legal mechanism that would address the issue of the churches that were confiscated during the Soviet era. While most are used *de facto* by religious groups without problems, several happen to be the objects of disputes, mainly between the Georgian Orthodox Church on one side and the Armenian Apostolic Church or the Roman Catholic Church on the other side.

Social attitudes toward religious minorities can be described as historically tolerant toward groups that have a longer history in Georgia – Apostolic Armenians, Muslims and Catholics – and widely intolerant toward other religious groups, which are seen as sectarian. The main reason behind such intolerance appears to be the fact that these groups are seen as a threat to the Georgian Orthodox Church and thus to Georgian national identity. This is coupled with a general ignorance of religions other than

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<sup>1</sup> Official Website of the Georgian Parliament [can be found at [http://www.parliament.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=ENG&sec\\_id=542](http://www.parliament.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=542)]

Georgian Orthodoxy. While the moves of the authorities against religious intolerance during the past few years have been welcomed by international community, from the point of view of minority religious groups, the Georgian state limits its actions to “the visible” – curbing religious violence – while being complacent about the roots of the problems. Historically, the State and the Georgian Orthodox Church have depended on each other, and this situation has not completely changed. While the Georgian Orthodox Church’s influence on society is important, it is perceived by other religious groups as not doing enough to condemn acts of religious intolerance. Regarding the media, the non-condemnation of religious violence, the usually biased reports on “non-traditional religious groups,” and the self-censorship of journalists refraining from criticizing the Georgian Orthodox Church are unanimously seen as encouraging religious intolerance.

The period between 1999 and 2003 saw an upsurge in religious violence toward non-traditional faiths, in particular Jehovah’s Witnesses. The violence was mainly instigated by two groups associated with the Georgian Orthodox Church: the followers of Basil Mkalavishvili, a defrocked Georgian Orthodox priest, and “Jvari” (the Cross). Those groups would mainly act by “exciting” local residents against places of worship of religious minorities. Local Orthodox priests were often reported to lead these groups. Violence occurred against the background of social intolerance, somehow encouraged by the media and by general passivity of the authorities, including the police and the judiciary. The coming to power of Mikhail Saakashvili marked the end of this period of violence, mainly by prosecuting the main authors of such crimes, and thus ending the general climate of impunity that prevailed until then. Acts of religious violence have occurred since and still happen now, but to a much lesser extent. Those incidents are described in detail by the report issued by the Public Defender’s Office every six months. Concerns were raised by religious groups about a resumption of religious violence, as some of those recent acts resemble those committed at the beginning of the 1999-2003 wave of violence.

Following widespread law enforcement reforms carried out by the new authorities, society’s confidence in law enforcement and security has increased in the past few years. However, when it comes to incidents involving religious minorities some misconduct on the part of the police continues to be reported. An improvement was also noticed with the judiciary, at least with regard to recent acts of violence. Formerly there was general concern among religious groups about the non-prosecution of many of those involved in acts of violence during 1999-2003. It also was noticed that many of the investigations launched by the General Procurator’s Office in the sphere of religious violence are stalled due to the lack of evidence. Finally, it should be noted that the Public Defender’s Office was generally described by religious minorities as a trusted and useful recourse of protection.

## 1. RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY<sup>2</sup>

In the 2002 General National Population Census of the State Department for Statistics of Georgia, the religious structure of the country's population was determined for the first time:<sup>3</sup>

Orthodox	83.9 % (3, 666, 233)
Muslims	9.9 % (433, 784)
Apostolic Armenians	3.9 % (171, 139)
Catholics	0.8 % (34, 727)
Jewish	0.1 % (3541)
“Other”	0.8 % (33648)
Non-Believers	0.6 % (28631)

Georgian Orthodoxy is the main religion in the country and the religion, at least nominally, of the great majority of ethnic Georgians. It has had a major role in the history of the country since the fourth century A.D., when it was declared the state religion. After a period of silence under Soviet rule, its influence on society has risen steadily after the country's independence in 1991 as an important part of the Georgian national identity.

Co-existing with Georgian Orthodox Christians, some religious groups such as Muslims, Apostolic Armenians, Catholics, Jews and Yezidi-Kurds have long formed part of the Georgian religious landscape:

Muslims comprise the second largest religious group. Islam is mainly connected with ethnicity in four main Muslim populations: ethnic Azeri, who mostly live in the southeastern region of Kvemo-Kartli, are mainly Shiite; ethnic Georgian Muslims of Ajara, mainly Sunnis; and ethnic Kists in the northeastern region, whose community is significantly shaped by Islamic brotherhoods (mainly Qadiriya and Nakshbandia); there is also a strong Islamic presence in Abkhazia. In addition, there is also a very small Muslim group, the Meskhets, a Turkish minority group that was deported from Georgia by Stalin in 1944 and of which there are only a few hundred in Georgia today (the issue of the repatriation of Meshetians has not been solved yet).

Apostolic Armenians form the third largest religious group and are correlated with the ethnic Armenian minority present in the country, mostly in the southern Samtskhe-Javakheti region, where they constitute the majority of the population.

Georgian Catholic community is today divided into three rites: Roman Catholics (ethnic Georgians), Armenians and Assyrians. Before the communist period, Georgia had around 90 000 – 100 000 Catholics, as opposed to around 35 000 today. They are concentrated in Samtskhe-Javakheti, in the southern part of Georgia, but there are also significant communities in Batumi, Kutaisi and Tbilisi.

<sup>2</sup> Census 2002; USSD 2006; Liberty Institute 2006; UNCHR 2003; CEN 2005.08; IFPR 2005; Armenian Apostolic Church; Catholic Church; Muslim Community; Russian Pentecostals; Baptist Church; Seventh-day Adventists; Lutheran Church ; Jehovah’s Witnesses

<sup>3</sup> The following statistics do not cover the populations in the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia

There are around 8000 Jews in the country, mostly in Tbilisi and Kutaisi, the two largest cities in Georgia. Judaism has been present in the country for 2600 years. There used to be 100 000 Jews before two waves of emigration in the early 1970's and the late 1980's.

A number of Yezidi – Kurds (18 000) have lived in the country for centuries, mostly in Tbilisi, Rustavi and Telavi (eastern Georgia)

In addition to those “traditional faiths”, we find so-called “non-traditional faiths”, a term used in different reports and by certain representatives of religious groups, which refers to more recent reforms or protestant movements that have either appeared or become more prominent since Georgia declared its independence in 1991. However, it should be noted that some groups classified as such - Adventists, Baptists, Russian Pentecostals and Lutherans - are not that recent. According to their representatives, they have been present in Georgia for 100, 150, 170 and 190 years, respectively. It is true that the number of adherents in some of these groups is relatively small – the Russian Pentecostals consist of 30 families and accept being called non-traditional. However, some religious groups have more representatives – Baptists claiming 18 000 and Jehovah’s Witnesses 16 000 adherents - much more than, for example, the number of Jews in the country. Other groups that can be defined as “non-traditional” are religious minorities, for example Catholics, targeted by the wave of religious violence which took place between 1999 and 2003. Malkhaz Songulashvili, from the Evangelical-Baptist Church, holds the opinion that those religious denominations invited to the ecumenical religious council organized by the Georgian Orthodox Church - Muslims, Catholics, Jews, Armenians, Baptists and Lutherans - are those that are considered “traditional”, at least by the Georgian Orthodox Church. As a matter of fact, the latter refuses to cooperate with “non-traditional” religious groups in Georgia. These considerations simply aim to show that classification between traditional and non-traditional is not as easy as it seems, and should not offend any denomination. However, for the purposes of this report the classification with regard to groups most targeted by acts of violence some years ago will be retained, along with those that have very few adherents.

Therefore, next to those “traditional faiths” we find: Jehovah’s Witnesses, who have been present in Georgia since 1953 and claim 16 000 adherents; Baptists (150 years of presence, 18 000 adherents); Seventh day Adventists (since 1904, 400 adherents); Russian Pentecostals (since 1835, 30 families left the country. Many emigrated due to economic reasons after Georgia declared its independence – 250 families in the U.S; Georgian Pentecostals and the New Apostolic Church, Mormons, Baha’is, Hare Krishnas, World of Life Church, Buddhists, Assembly of God, Salvation Army, and the Quakers in much more limited numbers.

## **2. RELIGIOUS MINORITIES AND LAW**

### **2.1 International Treaties and the Constitution**

Georgia is a signatory party to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1950 European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural rights and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>4</sup> which enshrine the principle of religious freedom

The Georgian Constitution provides for freedom of religion and the independence of the Church from the State, but also recognizes “the special importance of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Georgian history.”<sup>5</sup>

### **2.2 The Criminal Code**

The Criminal Code specifically prohibits interference with worship services, persecution of a person based on faith or religious belief<sup>6</sup>, and interference with the establishment of a religious organization<sup>7</sup>. Violations of these prohibitions are punishable by fine and/or imprisonment. Violations committed by a public official are considered abuse of power and are punishable by higher fines and/or longer terms of imprisonment.<sup>8</sup>

### **2.3 Legal Status of Religious Groups<sup>9</sup>**

#### **2.3.1 Concordat between State and Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC)**

The legal status of the Georgian Orthodox Church is regulated by a constitutional agreement (Concordat) signed with the State on 14 October 2002 which defines the relations between the two. No other religious group enjoys such an agreement with the State, and in fact other religious groups did not have any legal status until April 2005, when amendments to the Civil Code were adopted to allow them to register as non-profit organizations or foundations, a solution that they found unacceptable.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Official Website of the Georgian Parliament [can be found at [http://www.parliament.ge/index.php?lang\\_id=ENG&sec\\_id=542](http://www.parliament.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=542)]

<sup>5</sup> Constitution of Georgia - art. 9 & 14 [can be found at [http://www.parliament.ge/files/68\\_1944\\_216422\\_konst.pdf](http://www.parliament.ge/files/68_1944_216422_konst.pdf)]; USSD 2006; USCIRF 2006; USSD 2005; UNCHR 2006

<sup>6</sup> Article 155 -1 and 156

<sup>7</sup> Article 166

<sup>8</sup> Article 155-2

<sup>9</sup> Liberty Institute 2006; USSD 2006; IHFHR 2006; USSD 2005; Civil 2006.02.17.; Civil 2005.12.25; Civil 2005.12.23; Forum 18 – 2005.11.25; FILDH 2005; FILDH 2005; USSD IRF 2005; Public Defender 2005- 1; Public Defender 2006 – 1; Public Defender 2005 – 2; Georgian Orthodox Church; Armenian Apostolic Church; Catholic Church; Muslim Community; Russian Pentecostals; Baptist Church; Seventh-day Adventists; Lutheran Church ; Jehovah’s Witnesses

<sup>10</sup> Armenian Apostolic Church; Catholic Church; Muslim Community; Russian Pentecostals; Baptist Church; Seventh-day Adventists; Lutheran Church; Jehovah’s Witnesses

This agreement introduces inequity among religious groups with regard to legal status. In 2003, the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Religious Freedom stated that “this agreement could accentuate the imbalance between the minorities and the Orthodox Church and provide opponents to the religious minorities with further arguments.”<sup>11</sup>

In addition, the Constitutional Agreement gives the GOC a number of privileges not available to other groups. Under the terms of the Concordat, the members of the Orthodox Church are exempted from military service and can establish a military chaplaincy. The government recognizes marriages performed in the Orthodox Church, protects the secret of confession, and announces important religious holidays as public holidays and gives the Church a unique consultative role in government, especially in the sphere of education. The Church has certain tax exemptions; the State undertakes responsibility to partially compensate for the losses of church during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>12</sup>

Some of these articles, however, required the Parliament to adopt legislation, which has not occurred yet: Article 3 of the Constitutional Agreement, according to which the state recognizes the wedding ceremony conducted by the Church, is not practiced. So is Article 4, which permits the creation of the institution of confessor within military formations, prisons and other custody places. Articles 7, 8 and 11, which deal with different aspects of Church property and compensation for the damage made to the Church during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, are implemented partially. For example, the agreement states that “the treasury of the Church, as the part of the national treasury, is in the joint ownership of the State and Church according to the existing legislation.” But this “existing legislation” is not yet written and thus there is no rule on the joint ownership of the treasury. Furthermore, the treasury which is not in joint ownership was not transferred to the Church (holy parts and other holy relics). Article 10, which says that “the State takes the responsibility to conduct negotiations with other countries regarding the Georgian churches, monasteries, and their remains which are on the territory of that country” has not been implemented either.<sup>13</sup> Lastly, despite the Concordat granting the GOC the right to establish a military chaplaincy, no legislation has been adopted and there are no chaplains in military units.<sup>14</sup>

Catholics, Lutherans, Baptists, Armenian Apostolic, Jews and Muslims signed formal documents with the GOC Patriarchate agreeing to the Concordat, but stated after its publication that several of these controversial articles were not in the original document that they had signed. Representatives of non-traditional minority religious groups, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostals, were excluded from the Concordat process.<sup>15</sup>

It should be noted that religious groups in general do not call for the cancellation of the Concordat.<sup>16</sup> Their main concern is the fact that the existence of the GOC is recognized

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<sup>11</sup> UNCHR 2003

<sup>12</sup> USSD 2006; Public Defender 2005- 1

<sup>13</sup> Public Defender 2005 - 2

<sup>14</sup> USSD 2006

<sup>15</sup> USSD 2006

<sup>16</sup> Apostolic Armenians; Muslim Community; Russian Pentecostals

by the State and that it has the legal status of a public entity whereas other religious groups can only register under private law as any other association. Among the sources interviewed most wished for either the signing agreements with the State or, more generally, the possibility to register as “religious organizations” under the law on religion. Practical objections to the Concordat are the Tax Code exemptions provided only to the GOC and the articles relating to the return of some churches by the State.<sup>17</sup>

The Vatican and the Georgian state were about to sign a Concordat in September 2003 that would have granted legal status to the Catholic Church. However, huge Orthodox-led street demonstrations resulted in the cancellation of the signing ceremony by the government.<sup>18</sup> Regarding this issue, the Georgian Orthodox Church explains that “at that time this agreement was prepared by two states, Georgia and the Vatican, and the preparation had not been transparent, the signing announced two days before, which caused spontaneous demonstrations by youth and students.”<sup>19</sup>

In its report of December 2005 on the human rights situation in Georgia for the first six months of 2005, the Public Defender of Georgia directly criticized the discriminatory nature of the Concordat:

“These privileges are only granted to the Georgian Orthodox Church. This violates art 38 of the Constitution [principle of equality] and the fundamental principles of equality and non-discrimination protected by international agreements. Before the State grants the same privileges to other faiths, they are in a state of indirect discrimination. They don’t enjoy equal rights with the Orthodox Church. The Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief explicitly says that “All States shall take effective measures to prevent and eliminate discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief in the recognition, exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms in all fields of civil, economic, political, social and cultural life (art 4).”<sup>20</sup>

When the report was presented to the Parliament, this particular part caused numerous parliamentarians to slam the Public Defender as reported by Civil Georgia:<sup>21</sup>

“Pages from 81 to 94 [portion of the report which deals with religious freedom] is a shame and we cannot remain in the chamber to listen to this humiliation,” the member of Parliament (MP) Mamuka Katsiadze of the New Rights opposition party said at the session.

MP Nodar Grigalashvili from the ruling National Movement party also condemned this part of the report and walked out of the parliamentary session. Parliamentary Chairperson

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<sup>17</sup> Catholic Church; Armenian Apostolic Church; Muslim Community; Russian Pentecostals; Baptist Church; Seventh-day Adventists; Lutheran Church; Jehovah’s Witnesses

<sup>18</sup> FILDH 2005; Forum 18 – 2005.11.25

<sup>19</sup> Georgian Orthodox Church

<sup>20</sup> Public Defender 2005- 1

<sup>21</sup> USSD 2005, Civil.ge 2005.12.23

Nino Burjanadze showed a moderate stance and called on the parliamentarians not to be radical while assessing Public Defender Sozar Subari's report.

"Georgia was always proud of its tolerance... Rejection and condemnation of a person for a dissenting opinion is unacceptable. I also might not agree with some of the Public Defender's opinions but it does not mean that we should not listen to him," Nino Burjanadze, the parliamentary Chairperson, said. Influential parliamentarian from the National Movement Giga Bokeria slammed parliamentarians, both in the opposition and ruling party, who condemned Sozar Subari for his stance of religious freedom. MP Bokeria condemned on the other hand, "fundamentalist-style statements voiced by some MPs" and said that religious freedom "is not an issue for speculation or an issue for political blackmailing. In this regard Mr. Subari has my full political support," MP Bokeria said.

Bishop Zenon of Dmanisi, an influential Orthodox clergyman, also publicly criticized the Public Defender Sozar Subari on *Imedi* television on 24 December 2006:

"This is an unserious statement. Besides the fact that this is a [constitutional] agreement between the State and the Church, it also reflects the interests of the Georgian nation ... Rejection of this agreement is equal to a rejection of national interests."<sup>22</sup>

On 17 February 2006, the Parliament approved, with a 103 to 5 vote, the Public Defender's report, but with a negative assessment of the particular part of the report that speaks about the freedom of religion. In particular, parliamentarians condemned the Public Defender's stance on the Concordat. In its decision the Parliament stated that the Concordat will not be revised, and reiterated that the document should be "untouchable."<sup>23</sup>

### **2.3.2 2005 Civil Code Amendments or Law on Registration of Religious Groups**

In April 2005 the Parliament adopted amendments to the Civil Code which, for the first time in Georgian history, enabled religious groups to gain legal status.<sup>24</sup> Before these amendments religious groups were required to register as public entities, even though the law provided no mechanism to do so and simultaneously stipulated a fine for any unregistered religious group.<sup>25</sup> Religious groups may now register as not-for-profit organizations<sup>26</sup>. Registration is a function of the Tax Department (before a 14 December 2006 amendment it was a function of the Ministry of Justice (MOJ). This status allows them to own property collectively, open communal bank accounts and act as entities in court. Registration is not obligatory.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Civil 2005.12.25

<sup>23</sup> Civil 2006.02.17

<sup>24</sup> Public Defender 2005 -1

<sup>25</sup> USSD 2006

<sup>26</sup> Articles 27 to 39 of the Civil Code of Georgia

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

In July 2005 the MOJ approved the first applications filed under the new registration process. Both the Foundation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Georgia (Mormons) and the Representation of the International Agency of Adventist Development and Assistance in Georgia (which is affiliated with the Seventh-day Adventist Church) received approval in less time than fifteen days. Additional twelve organizations subsequently registered under the law.<sup>28</sup>

Only one incident was noted with regard to registration when one religious organization. The Madli (Grace) Pentecostal Church in the Tbilisi suburb of Gldani lodged its application with the notary Mzia Arsenishvili, in September 2005. She however refused to sign it, claiming that only the Orthodox Church exists throughout the world and that she would not process applications by other faiths. After the Madli Pentecostal Church complained to the Public Defender's Office, the Justice Ministry removed Arsenishvili from office for one year.<sup>29</sup>

Although sometimes viewed as a positive step by the authorities,<sup>30</sup> most religious communities, and at least all those interviewed, are not satisfied with the amendments and refuse to register themselves.<sup>31</sup> Several reasons can be provided:<sup>32</sup>

- First of all, the non-recognition of the religious character of the communities puts them on equal footing with any other private association or foundation.
- As a result, the discrimination is introduced: the GOC is the only body of public law while all others will be bodies of private law. For some, registering would mean acknowledging such discrimination. Besides this, official legal discrimination can add to social discrimination.
- The *de facto* non-recognition of the historical religious heritage of some churches: being registered in 2006 and claiming churches built several centuries ago appears to be contradictory, bearing in mind that the issue of return of churches is an important one.
- The absence of provisions concerning exemptions of taxes, a privilege the GOC enjoys under the Concordat.
- The absence of a mechanism to link the property of churches already acquired under a private person – which is usually the case given the absence of legal status – to the religious union that would then be registered.

The solution desired by religious groups is the adoption of a law on religion/religious unions to address those problems. It is noteworthy that although most note a theoretical incompatibility between the equality under the Constitution of all religious denominations and the higher status of the GOC, in practice the will to remove the Concordat has not been widely expressed. The possibility to be recognized as a religious body seems to be enough.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

<sup>29</sup> Forum 18 – 2005.11.25; USSD 2006

<sup>30</sup> HRW 2006

<sup>31</sup>Catholic Church; Armenian Apostolic Church; Muslim Community; Russian Pentecostals; Baptist Church; Seventh-day Adventists; Lutheran Church ; Jehovah's Witnesses; USSD 2006; IHFHR 2006; FH – NIT 2006; HRIDC 2005

<sup>32</sup> Ibid

<sup>33</sup> Ibid

Likewise, in 2006, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) recommended the Georgian government “to establish a mechanism to enable religious communities to gain legal personality as public religious bodies under Georgian law, consistent with international human rights standards.”<sup>34</sup>

The adoption of a law on religion was also seen by Zurab Tskhovebadze, spokesperson of the GOC, as a desirable solution for religious minorities, adding however that “any status obtained under this law should not be at the same level as the Constitutional Agreement” given the “particular position of Orthodoxy in Georgia.” He added that it was not for the GOC to decide what kind of law should be adopted, but advanced the idea of a “three-level” model with the GOC. It consists of GOC, “traditional denominations”, and “non-traditional denominations.” He added that nothing was decided, that it was just a “potential model” and that “further discussions were needed.”<sup>35</sup>

Giorgi Meladze, a lawyer at the Liberty Institute, a prominent Georgian Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) actively involved in the defense of the rights of religious minorities, stated:<sup>36</sup>

“I am against a law on religious organization, because you would have to define what a religious organization is and is not. Somebody will always be left out. Nobody is discriminated if religiosity is not defined by the law.”

However as said before, it came out of the discussions with representatives of religious minorities that the present amendments are not acceptable to them and therefore they did not and do not plan to register, leaving the legal problems they used to have unresolved.

Therefore, at this point, the property legally acquired by those groups, for example new places of worship, is not owned under the group’s title but under the name of a private person, usually representatives of religious groups. However, those representatives did not report legal problems in building places of worship.

### **Comments by Religious Minorities on Legal Status**

#### *Georgian Orthodox Church*

“A law on religions is necessary in Georgia to address the needs of religious groups. But it should not be on the same level as the Constitutional Agreement because Orthodoxy has a particular position in Georgia. When we prepared the Concordat, it had been a common decision with Catholics, Apostolic Armenians, Baptists, Muslims, Lutherans and Jews and thereby the peaceful co-existence between religions was affirmed. So those religious groups supported the Concordat. [Asked about whether a law on religion could also apply to non-traditional denominations] There is a lot of non-traditional faiths. We

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<sup>34</sup> USCIRF 2006

<sup>35</sup> Georgian Orthodox Church

<sup>36</sup> Liberty Institute 2006

have to create a law for them also. We don't know which one; it is not for us to decide. It could be a three-level law. However nothing is definitive, it is a possible model. We need to discuss [the issue]. [About the failure to reach an agreement with the Vatican] at that time this agreement was prepared by two states, Georgia and the Vatican, and the preparation had not been transparent; the signing announced two days before, which caused spontaneous demonstrations by youth and students."

#### *Armenian Apostolic Church*

"[...] there is a big vacuum. The Parliament says 'we have adopted amendments to Article 1509 [of the Civil Code] and now you have the right to register,' but in fact it is not true. There is no law on religious organizations; at least not on religious organizations 'as legal entities of public law.' Only the GOC enjoys such status after signing a Concordat with the State. The Vatican failed to do so some years ago. Religious organizations are organizations which have religious specifics. They are not NGOs. It is legal nonsense for religious organization to register as NGOs or foundations. This is a big problem for traditional faiths because the law does not recognize their historical heritage. It sounds strange that we are the Armenian Apostolic Church in Georgia and we are an NGO. Also about the return of churches; the government can say, "you registered in 2006 so we cannot give you back this church." Also, in theory, any other group of persons can register under our name. So it is a big lie. It does not acknowledge us as descendants of the Armenian diocese, which has significant heritage in Georgia as everyone knows. [It also creates] discrimination among other groups. [...] We don't say that the Constitutional Agreement is bad. It is good. The Georgian Orthodox Church is the main Church here. But we want rights ourselves. We don't want exactly the same rights of course. Georgian Orthodox Church is mentioned in the Constitution. All we need is a legal agreement, not a constitutional one, that the State recognizes the traditional faiths as legal entity of public law, owner of some historical monuments, etc. We want to be clear concerning our rights and responsibilities [...]."

#### *Catholic Church*

"For us there is no law giving legal status to religious groups. At one point some other Churches agreed to register but we talked and agreed not to do so. We wrote to the President but received no answer. I see two possibilities: either a law on religion for all or an agreement concluded between the State and the five main Churches. [...] It would not be on the same level as the Concordat, not a constitutional agreement as this seems impossible to reach, but an agreement with the State. It could be concluded with other groups that wish to do so but it will be easier for the five main religions: Catholics, Apostolic Armenians, Baptists, Lutheran, Muslims and Jews. [...] At this point we will not register because a church is not an organization or a foundation. And supposing we will, who should be the founder - me? The Pope? [...] With regard to the Concordat, well, I would say it is acceptable for the GOC to have such an agreement under this situation. At the beginning, the dangers were to see *de facto* institutionalization of a state religion. But my opinion overall is that it is not good for the GOC itself, it could create problems in the future for them."

### *Muslim Community*

“Which law? There is no law on religious status. What we need is governmental recognition, to exist as a legal entity of public law. [...] at the same time we are not against the Constitutional Agreement.”

### *Lutheran Church*

“We refuse to register as an NGO. We will never agree to register a church as an NGO. We regret that so far the government of this country has not issued a law on religion. There is no law regarding the rights and position of religions. We, together with other denominations, very much hope for it. A church is not an NGO.”

### *Baptist Church*

“The Georgian Orthodox Church has been extremely privileged, like a state religion. But it is not under the Constitution. They are freely given land and property by the government while others are not allowed to build anything. [...] [The 2005 amendments to the Civil Code] propose different approaches to different religions. One kind is under private law while the other kind, only the GOC in practice, is under public law. The rest of us would like to safeguard equal rights. That is why we, together with Lutherans, Apostolic Armenians, Catholics, and others, would prefer to wait till new solutions are found. Those who registered under private law have no way to link their present property to their historical heritage. This is not an issue for the Baptist Church. Most of our churches are pulled down. But it is crucial for the Apostolic Armenians and Catholics. The solution would be that the Georgian Parliament passes a law to safeguard equal rights for everyone. It should be within a similar framework with the GOC. We should have not a constitutional agreement, but at least an agreement with the State. Two things are necessary: the right to exist as a public legal entity and recognition of the historical heritage of each church. When society and the Parliament mature they will recognize themselves that the Constitutional Agreement is not needed.”

### *Jehovah Witnesses*

“We did not register with the law because we have been a branch of Watchtower since 1998. For a few years our status as such was cancelled but now there is no problem. So for us, this law does not bring us anything. Besides, there is nothing positive in this law. Our status would be the same as any commercial organization. According to this law there are no exceptions regarding taxes and privileges. If you import Bibles you have to pay taxes. [About the Concordat] Of course, theoretically we should all be equal, even the Georgian Orthodox Church, which would be ideal.”

### *Seventh-day Adventists*

“We did not register. Before the Georgian Orthodox Church made an agreement with the government all churches were equal before the law. Well, *de facto* it was not so, but *de jure* at least, it was. After the Concordat was signed, they [GOC] enjoy a high position. The Georgian Orthodox Church does not need to register. In theory all denominations are the same in terms of treatment under the law, but in practice they are not. The higher status of the GOC is not friendly with other denominations. We did not register because it introduces a hierarchy of legal status. Registration would be like acknowledging the higher status of the GOC. But for practical reasons maybe we will register in the future. We would be equal to any NGO. Everyone non-Orthodox is already called sectarian. To introduce more discrimination on the basis of the legal status does not help.”

#### *Russian Pentecostals*

“We don’t need registration in practice [...] about the Concordat, from a legal point of view, all should be equal, but from an historical point of view, Georgia always espoused Orthodox. From this point of view there is no discussion that they can have the right to a higher status.”

#### **2.4 New Law on General Education<sup>37</sup>**

In 1996 a course on religion was introduced in Georgian schools to promote the idea of multi-faiths society and to teach children the essence of different religions.<sup>38</sup> However, due to the fact that teachers were not prepared and only a few schools had access to the few manuals that were developed, the course was set aside for some time.<sup>39</sup> Gradually it evolved toward the teaching of Georgian Orthodoxy, with classroom full of icons and portraits of religious figures and students involved into religious rituals and prayers.<sup>40</sup> Teachers were influenced in this process by local priests.<sup>41</sup> Although the course should have been elective, many schools did not provide any alternative course that offered a multi-faiths student body, and some school would not allow children not to attend.<sup>42</sup>

In April 2005, a new Law on General Education was adopted by the Parliament that sought to address this issue.<sup>43</sup>

According to this law, religious proselytism, indoctrination and forced assimilation at state schools is prohibited along with displays of religious symbols by teachers except for academic purposes. The law states that given the separation of the State and the Church, the teaching of Orthodoxy, or any other religions, can only take place after school; it must be voluntary and based on student requests. Teachers cannot be involved or attend such

<sup>37</sup> Liberty Institute 2006; USSD 2006; IHFHR 2006; USSD 2005; UNCHR 2006; HRIDC 2005; Forum 18 – 2005.11.25; HRW 2005; USSD IRF 2005; Georgian Orthodox Church; Baptist Church; Public Defender 2006 – 1; Public Defender 2005- 1

<sup>38</sup> Liberty Institute 2006

<sup>39</sup> Ibid

<sup>40</sup> Liberty Institute 2006, Seventh-day Adventists; USSD 2006; IHFHR 2006; USSD 2005; Forum 18 – 2005.11.25; HRW 2005; USSD IRF 2005

<sup>41</sup> Liberty Institute 2006

<sup>42</sup> Liberty Institute 2006; USSD 2006; HRW 2005; USSD IRF 2005

<sup>43</sup> Liberty Institute 2006; USSD 2006; IHFHR 2006; USSD 2005; HRIDC 2005; HRW 2005; USSD IRF 2005; Public Defender 2005- 1

teaching<sup>44</sup> and the only thing the school should provide are its facilities.<sup>45</sup> It is noteworthy that these prohibitions apply only to teachers and more generally to the school administration. Students have complete freedom in this regard, which means that theoretically they can proselytize their religion during school hours.<sup>46</sup>

The law introduces a new course on the history of the main world religions. Giorgi Meladze from the Liberty Institute, who was involved in the development of the curriculum, explains:

“The general idea with regard to the curriculum will be: during the first grade (from class 1 to 4) teaching will be general, with an ethical focus. During the second grade (4-9) focus will be historical. During the third grade (10-12) there will be in-depth focus on what each religion, or at least the main, most predominant religions in the world. However, requirements for schools are minimal and this curriculum is suggestive, which means that schools decide how to implement the teaching for those topics in practice through other classes, for example, history. There are around 3000 schools in Georgia so there can be 3000 different classes, the only obligation is to effectively teach these issues to students, propose alternative courses, and not enter into any kind of proselytism or indoctrination of one religion. The Ministry of Education will conduct audits in school to ensure that.”<sup>47</sup>

However, the law has not yet been applied as teachers have to be trained and textbooks have to be fully developed.<sup>48</sup> This should take two more years.<sup>49</sup> In the meantime, the course that was introduced in 1996 will be continued.<sup>50</sup> According to representatives of religious minorities - who welcome the new law - classes are still decorated with religious icons and portraits of religious figures, although the practice to lead students into prayers stopped after Shevardnadze left office. Besides this, they did not mention problems related to forced attendance of the course.<sup>51</sup> However, the 2006 United States Department’s report (USSD 2006) noted:

“Teachers often began most courses, including mathematics and science, by leading the class in a recitation of Orthodox prayers. Those students who did not participate were sometimes punished.”<sup>52</sup>

As Giorgi Meladze from the Liberty Institute put it, “the situation in schools with regard to the [old] course on religion is mixed.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Liberty Institute 2006; USSD 2006; IHFHR 2006; USSD 2005; HRW 2005; Public Defender 2005- 1

<sup>45</sup> Liberty Institute 2006

<sup>46</sup> Public Defender 2005 – 1; Liberty Institute 2006

<sup>47</sup> Liberty Institute 2006

<sup>48</sup> Liberty Institute 2006; Baptist Church; USSD 2005; USSD IRF 2005

<sup>49</sup> USSD IRF 2005

<sup>50</sup> Liberty Institute 2006; USSD IRF 2005

<sup>51</sup> Armenian Apostolic Church; Catholic Church; Muslim Community; Russian Pentecostals; Baptist Church; Seventh-day Adventists; Lutheran Church; Jehovah’s Witnesses

<sup>52</sup> USSD 2006

<sup>53</sup> Liberty Institute 2006

#### **2.4.1 Concordat and Law on Education**

The Concordat affirms the collaboration between the Church and the State in the field of, *inter alia*, education, and stipulates that schools may set up classes of Georgian Orthodoxy. According to Giorgi Meladze, although the legal value of the Constitutional Agreement is higher than the law, the law delimits the general rule and therefore the Concordat remains valid - but such collaboration and such classes can only take place after school hours, without teachers, and so on, i.e. in the framework of the law.<sup>54</sup>

#### **2.4.2 2005 Memorandum between the Ministry of Education and the State**

Three months before the adoption of the Law on Education, on 22 January 2005 the Ministry of Education signed a memorandum with the Georgian Orthodox Church<sup>55</sup> reaffirming their cooperation in the field of education and providing for the creation of a joint commission that would work on the following issues:<sup>56</sup>

- a) Development of schoolbooks on Christian Orthodoxy and curricula.
- b) Development of procedures on hiring the teachers [of religion classes], their training and dismissal.
- c) Creation of procedures to elaborate a subject that will replace the current course on religion at schools and guarantee that, in the process of creating schoolbooks for this new subject and when discussing it, someone from the Georgian Orthodox Church should be involved.
- d) Financing of projects of the Georgian Orthodox Church on religious education.
- e) Setting up of the terms and conditions on the cooperation of State and Church on the issue of the development and the education of young people.

In its report for the first six months of 2005, the Public Defender of Georgia listed its concerns regarding this Memorandum.<sup>57</sup>

“This Memorandum jeopardizes the constitutional principle of separation of the State and the Church and discriminates the followers of other religions. Because:

1. According to the Memorandum the state can finance the study of Orthodox Christianity, not only in religious school, but also in state schools.
2. The Georgian Orthodox Church will participate in the process of recruiting, training and dismissing the teachers of religion in state schools (the name of the subject is not decided yet). The decision therefore can be based on the religion of the person and not only according to his qualification. The principle of academic freedom would therefore not be respected and discrimination of non-Orthodox teachers will in practice take place.

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<sup>54</sup> Liberty Institute 2006

<sup>55</sup> Liberty Institute 2006; USSD 2006; USSD 2005; HRIDC 2005; USSD IRF 2005; Public Defender 2005- 1

<sup>56</sup> Public Defender 2005 - 1

<sup>57</sup> Ibid

3. The Memorandum does not mention that the teaching of Orthodox Christianity is optional
4. It is not clear what is meant by the memorandum part c), the substitute subject for the Orthodox religion can be: religion, literature, history of natural science, and thus if the Patriarchate will participate in the creation of books for this subject, this will cause a) the scientific nature of education to be undermined (with the risk of teaching creation theory at schools) b) there will be religious censorship in the educational system and c) the teaching of the process regarding other religions will be non-pluralistic and tendentious.
5. The Memorandum contradicts the Law on Education according to which the State ensures that public schools are independent from religious and political unions influence. They aim at teaching the students based on a liberal democratic foundation and take the responsibility not to allow non-scientific opinions or theories to be taught as scientific facts or theories.”

However, Giorgi Meladze from the Liberty Institute, who was involved in the development of the Law of Education, puts this problem into perspective:<sup>58</sup>

“The Memorandum is a sign of a tricky situation with the GOC. The State tries to remain neutral. But at the same time, the policy of the State for years has been to be friendly and close to the Church. The State supports the GOC financially and politically, and in return the GOC supports the State. It is like a deal. In my opinion, the State really tries to stay neutral and this Memorandum has no legal value. It cannot counter the law.

If the Ministry of Education helps financing courses on Georgian Orthodoxy therefore it will remain within the framework of the law, and only after school hours and at the request of the student, etc. It is noteworthy that no other religious group has signed such a Memorandum with the Ministry of Education.<sup>59</sup>

The representative of the Georgian Orthodox Church simply stated that this document aims at “facilitating the collaboration between the Church and the State.”<sup>60</sup>

It remains to be seen if the Memorandum has just a symbolic value - as Giorgi Meladze put it - or not, once the Law on Education is effectively implemented.

It is worth noting that a similar agreement was signed between the Ministry of Education of the Adjara Autonomic Republic and the Georgian Orthodox Church, Batumi and Skhalka eparchies, on 7 April 2005.<sup>61</sup> However, the Minister of Education of Georgia wrote to the Minister of Education of Adjara to say that such agreements can be made only by the Ministry of Education of Georgia and that this document cannot have any legal power.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Liberty Institute 2006

<sup>59</sup> Liberty Institute 2006

<sup>60</sup> Georgian Orthodox Church

<sup>61</sup> Public Defender 2005 – 1; USSD IRF 2005

<sup>62</sup> Public Defender 2005 - 1

## **2.5 Return of Churches<sup>63</sup>**

An important issue for the Armenian Apostolic Church and the Roman Catholic Church is the return of churches that were confiscated during the Soviet period,<sup>64</sup> some of which were closed and some transformed into nondenominational places such as community halls.<sup>65</sup> Such places were also confiscated from the Jewish community and the Muslim community.<sup>66</sup>

The Roman Catholic Church demands the return of “five most beautiful churches in Georgia” that are located outside the capital in Kutaisi, Gori, Ivlida, Ude and Batumi.<sup>67</sup> All are used by the Georgian Orthodox Church, which claims that the churches were Orthodox before used by Catholic.<sup>68</sup> The Armenian Apostolic Church claims five churches, which are currently closed,<sup>69</sup> the most problematic one being the Norasheni Church in Tbilisi.<sup>70</sup> The church belonged to Armenians prior to the Soviet period. A library of the scientific academy was opened in the church during the Soviet period.<sup>71</sup> On 15 February 1995, by decision of the Patriarchate, the church was turned into the Georgian Orthodox Saint Mary Church. This caused huge protest from the Armenian community. The Patriarchate was forced to leave the church but nevertheless it was not returned to the Armenians. Today no religious services are held there.<sup>72</sup>

The return of churches is also an issue for the Georgian Orthodox Church. Legally, since Georgia’s independence in 1991, churches remain the property of the State.<sup>73</sup> However, the government has already returned several churches to the GOC.<sup>74</sup>

The Concordat provides for the creation of a commission in charge of defining which churches historically belonged to the Georgian Orthodox Church in order for the State to return them.<sup>75</sup> However, such a commission has not been created yet. The Georgian Orthodox Church states that it will be possible only after the adoption of a law on religion, which the Parliament is not ready to adopt.<sup>76</sup> The creation of the commission depends also on a state initiative.<sup>77</sup> Giorgi Meladze from the Liberty Institute believes that the solution lies in pushing for the establishment of this commission, so as to clarify the historical ownership of controversial churches and proceed with their return.<sup>78</sup> The

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<sup>63</sup> Liberty Institute 2006; USSD 2006; USSD 2005; USSD IRF 2005; Public Defender 2005- 1; Public Defender 2005 – 2; Public Defender 2006 – 1; Civil 2005.04.30; Georgian Orthodox Church; Catholic Church; Baptist Church; Armenian Apostolic Church; Jehovah’s Witnesses; Muslim Community; Lutheran Church; Seventh-day Adventists; Russian Pentecostals

<sup>64</sup> Armenian Apostolic Church; Catholic Church; Liberty Institute 2006; Public Defender 2006 – 1; Public Defender 2005 – 2; Public Defender 2005- 1; USSD IRF 2005; USSD 2005; USSD 2006

<sup>65</sup> Georgian Orthodox Church; USSD 2006; Catholic Church; Armenian Apostolic Church

<sup>66</sup> USSD 2006; USSD 2005

<sup>67</sup> Catholic Church

<sup>68</sup> Catholic Church

<sup>69</sup> Armenian Apostolic Church

<sup>70</sup> Public Defender 2005- 1; USSD IRF 2005

<sup>71</sup> Public Defender 2005- 1

<sup>72</sup> Public Defender 2005- 1

<sup>73</sup> Armenian Apostolic Church; Liberty Institute 2006

<sup>74</sup> USSD 2006

<sup>75</sup> Liberty Institute 2006; Public Defender 2005- 1

<sup>76</sup> Public Defender 2005- 1

<sup>77</sup> Public Defender 2005- 1

<sup>78</sup> Liberty Institute 2006

issue is also an important one for neighboring Armenia: In April 2005, Armenian Parliamentary chairman Artur Bagdasarian during his visit to Georgia met with the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church to discuss the creation of a joint commission “to study the historic background of those churches in Georgia that are disputed by the Georgian Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic Churches.”<sup>79</sup> Although it was reported at the time that both sides reached an agreement, such a commission has not been set up so far.

The government has not taken any measure in this respect. Both congregations state that they have sent numerous letters concerning the issue to the government but have never received any reply.<sup>80</sup> The Catholic Church states that discussions with the Georgian Orthodox Church “have not had concrete results.”<sup>81</sup> The Public Defender declared that his efforts toward the government did not bring any results either.<sup>82</sup> Giuseppe Pasoto, head of the Catholic community, explained that the claim for one church was brought to court, with documents in support for the claim, but in the end they were told that in the absence of legal status their claim could not be accepted.<sup>83</sup>

More than the return of churches, relations between faiths are at stake here. The Public Defender’s Office in its report for the first six months of 2005 states that because of the absence of progress on the issue of the return of churches, “relations between the Patriarchate and the Armenian Apostolic Church remain very tense.”<sup>84</sup> As Giuseppe Pasoto puts it, “This is really a big problem. Until it is resolved, there will remain a problem between Catholics and Orthodox. It is a general principle that when justice has not been served, problems cannot be solved. We cannot close our eyes on this issue. Even if we officially did, there will always be a pain inside.”<sup>85</sup>

An example of this lack of clarity and tension is an incident that took place on 14 July 2005.<sup>86</sup> In July 2005, on the initiative of the Georgian bishop of Akhalkalaki, the region of Georgia most heavily populated by Armenians, students from Tbilisi and representatives of the eparchy came to restore several religious buildings in the region. After being welcomed by the local population they were requested to leave the following day because, according to the local population, in the church of Samsara village, which they claim has Armenian origins, Orthodox nuns had put icons on the walls and prayed inside while students were trying to erase Armenian crosses from the church walls to clear away any sign of its origins. The students left, but the same evening returned to hang a Georgian flag in front of the church. The local population used force to make the students and nuns leave, and three people suffered from concussions. The event was reported in media and the Public Defender met all parties involved. He concluded that students only tried to restore the church, that the use of force was criminal, and that the bishop should have informed the local government beforehand and involved Armenian

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<sup>79</sup> Civil 2005.04.30

<sup>80</sup> Catholic Church; Armenian Apostolic Church

<sup>81</sup> Catholic Church

<sup>82</sup> Public Defender 2005 - 1

<sup>83</sup> Catholic Church

<sup>84</sup> Public Defender 2005 - 1

<sup>85</sup> Catholic Church

<sup>86</sup> Public Defender 2005 - 1

youth in the process. This shows how the issue over churches can lead to physical violence and mistrust between different faiths and different ethnic minorities.

### **Comments by Religious Minorities on Return of Churches**

#### *Catholic Church*

“It is a major problem, not just for me of course, but for all the Georgian Catholics in Georgia. We claim five churches in Kutaisi, Gori, Batumi, Ude, and Ivlita. They are some of the largest and most beautiful in Georgia, all of which are at present used by the GOC. We have talked to them, to the State, but nothing has been done. We discussed this with the GOC, made some efforts, told them that they can use it if they at least acknowledge that those churches are Catholic churches and return them to us once they have finished using them. But they say that those churches were Orthodox which were later transformed into Catholic churches, which is not true. Everyone knows and we have historical documents to prove it. One case went to court all the way to the Supreme Court. Tons of documents were brought to support the case. At the very end, the court told us that the absence of legal status does not allow them to decide on the case. Now I think the best solution is dialogue [with GOC]. They should give us a good gesture, to return one or two churches for example. For now those churches belong legally to the GOC, they were returned through the mechanism of the Concordat. This is really a big problem. Until it is resolved, there will remain a problem between Catholics and Orthodox.

#### *Armenian Apostolic Church*

“Legally, according to legislation of Georgia we are nothing, we don’t exist. Now we find ourselves in the administration building of the Armenian Apostolic Church and we do our religious service in the church in front of us. But legally it is nothing, it simply exists in name. Legally churches belong to the State, to the Ministry of Culture. We accept that, as long as we can use it and it is not given to another Church. Two churches are officially open in Tbilisi. One is an active church, another is being renovated. Five churches are closed since 1930. We have applied to the government, prime minister, Parliament, everyone, but no one helped. Some churches are used by the GOC. The Concordat provides for the return of Orthodox churches, but not Armenian [ones]. We think the GOC doesn’t want to solve the problem of returning churches.”

#### *Lutheran Church*

“We have some churches, for example in Bolnisi, Asukheti, which are used by the Greek Orthodox [Church]. However, these are large, old churches and would cost a lot in renovation and maintenance. They do not correspond to our needs today. They were made to host 2000 people. Now 40-50 people would gather in them. So for now it is not so important - we are still wondering what we will do concerning those churches.”

#### *Baptist Church*

“The churches we built in the past are pulled down and this is not an important issue for us, unlike the Armenian Apostolic Church.”

*Muslim Community*

“All Muslim mosques are open and there is no problem. Maybe only one or two still pose problems. They were transformed into cultural centers during the Soviet era. But the problem will be solved.”

### **3. RELIGIOUS MINORITIES AND SOCIETY**

#### **3.1 Religious Minorities and the Authorities<sup>87</sup>**

The common perception in international reports is that the present government is active in defending the rights of religious minorities.

One reason for this is the fact that the religious violence during 1999-2003 stopped after the authorities prosecuted its main authors of these crimes, among which was the defrocked extremist priest of GOC, Basil Mkalashvili. Another reason is the adoption of legislation regarding religious minorities, namely the Law on Education and the amendments to the Civil Code allowing religious groups to gain legal status. The USSD 2006 praised the Georgian authorities for “effectively advocating for religious freedom” and “having made numerous public speeches and appearances in support of minority religious groups.”<sup>88</sup>

This positive assessment contrasts, however, with negative comments received from some of the representatives interviewed. For some the government took measures to curb religious violence, mainly by arresting a dozen of those who were responsible. However, this was done without solving, first, the problems that are at the root of this violence, mainly the need to advocate for religious tolerance and to improve the attitude of the media, and second, the legal problems that minorities encounter, mainly with regard to legal status and the return of churches.<sup>89</sup>

One root cause seems to be the relationship between the State and the GOC. The Georgian Orthodox Church and the State are historically interlinked in Georgia,<sup>90</sup> although the new authorities “try to remain more neutral than the previous ones.”<sup>91</sup> Lela Kartvelishvili, from the International Center on Conflict and Negotiation, who was first to raise the idea of religious councils between all faiths at the end of the period of religious violence to prevent such acts in the future, states that:

“The Church and State are not separated. It is somehow the same situation as it used to be. The interests of the GOC and the State have always been linked. Every political party seeks support from the GOC, since it has a direct influence on the electorate. It is two-way support. The States support the GOC and the GOC supports the State.”<sup>92</sup>

In this context the perception of those representatives mentioned above is that the State does not want to be involved in the problems of religious minorities and is trying to conciliate both the GOC and its international reputation. While it has solved the “most

<sup>87</sup> ICCN 2006; Forum 18 – 2006.11.10; USSD 2006; USCIRF 2006; USSD 2005; Marig – N.L; Catholic Church; Baptist Church; Armenian Apostolic Church; Jehovah’s Witnesses; Muslim Community; Russian Pentecostals

<sup>88</sup> USSD 2006

<sup>89</sup> Catholic Church; Armenian Apostolic Church; Baptist Church; ICCN 2006

<sup>90</sup> ICCN 2006; Marig – N.L; Civil 2005.12.25

<sup>91</sup> ICCN 2006

<sup>92</sup> ICCN 2006

visible” problems with regard to religious minorities by arresting a dozen of the authors of religious violence, it has remained inactive in dealing with the less visible but most important problems for minorities in order to avoid opposition from the Georgian Orthodox Church. (See comments below)

### **Comments by Religious Minorities on Attitude of the Authorities**

#### *Armenian Church*

“When the Bishop, Head of the Diocese, sends letters to the prime minister or president, we don’t even get an answer. We believe the attitude of the government is not positive toward religious minorities. Some public demonstration and speeches [to support multi-faith society] happen but in fact it does nothing that matters, at least with regard to traditional religious minorities. For non-traditional ones, they took some extremists to jail and that’s it. This is hiding the real problems [...].”

#### *Roman Catholic Church*

“There is no government policy on religious issues. The government does nothing on that. It is true that the climate is not the same - it has improved, but nothing has been done and nothing is prepared to tackle real problems. The government just does not take a position on those issues, neither in a bad nor in a good way. At the beginning we spoke about a “first period” when the government had other issues to resolve. But this first period is long gone and nothing has changed concerning our problems. At least in the past we used to talk about it. Now nothing is going on. They don’t even answer our letters. All discussions are focused on economic and other issues but nothing goes on regarding religious issues.”

#### *Baptist Church*

“If we compare, the attitude of the government is better than it used to be. We did not have any major atrocities against religious minorities even if some actions, similar to those committed by Basil Mkalavishvili, have started to happen again. I am thinking of the attack during the presentation of a book on the Catholic Church in Tbilisi and in Akhaltsikhe, the attack during the opening of the Assyrian centre, violence against children at schools. So I don’t know what is better: the previous authorities or the present ones, because the latter are simply being pragmatic. Nothing has been done to educate society. The government ostensibly celebrates tolerance day, but does nothing to improve tolerance in real terms. After the (Rose) revolution religious groups have been ghettoized. They were told ‘you’re not beaten up anymore so keep silent.’ We don’t have any access to national or social life where we could have had some impact, such as in the peace-making process with the breakaway regions and other important issues. We have no access to media [...] regarding the role of the GOC; well... [the State] tries not to argue with them. But in fact this society is not deeply religious. Religiosity is old-fashioned these days and the government has the power to reverse things if it has the will to do so. Therefore my explanation for this inactivity is that, first, they do not have any

understanding of religious issues and, second, they don't have anything to gain in downplaying the Orthodox Church.”

#### *Muslim Community*

“The *President* protects the right for each people to have a religion. We support its action.”

#### *Russian Pentecostals*

“The government has already made big progress in terms of curbing violence [against religious minorities] and also in helping us get a plot of land to build our prayer house on. I do not think they will go further to avoid confrontations [with the GOC].”

#### *Jehovah's Witnesses*

“The government has taken positive steps, mainly in providing training to some structures such as the police and prosecutors. Most of the members of the Parliament use to work for NGOs who protected our rights and they understand the situation. They are trying to provide religious minorities with a good legal basis. [...] One major problem for us remains though. During the last three years we have not been able to rent the Sport Palace (in Tbilisi) to hold our convention. The owner refuses without giving any reason. We know unofficially that the reason was elections were going on. The Palace is communal property. We applied to the mayor but never received any response. Therefore we gathered 5000 people in Marneuli outside the capital. Simply, it is a problem to get all the people there. The other place in Tbilisi big enough to gather our adherents are the two stadiums, but they also belong to the city so they would not agree. [Asked about the contradiction between the positive perception of the authorities and the impossibility to rent the Sport Palace] We think the government is being positive. They give us possibilities. They just don't give us big possibilities. In all civilized countries, Jehovah's Witnesses are allowed to hold such assemblies.”

### **3.2 Religious Minorities and Media<sup>93</sup>**

The attitude of the media about religious minority issues is unanimously assessed as negative and one-sided by representatives of religious minorities.<sup>94</sup>

This negative attitude was particularly visible during the period of religious violence between 1999 and 2003. In this respect, a series of interviews was conducted in 2003 by the Movement against Religious Intolerance in Georgia (MARIG)<sup>95</sup> that tries to assess,

<sup>93</sup> Public Defender 2006 – 1; Public Defender 2005 – 2; ICCN 2006; Marig – G.N; Marig – R.S; Marig – N.L; Marig – M.S; Marig – B.K.; Marig-A.S ; Armenian Apostolic Church; Catholic Church; Russian Pentecostals; Baptist Church; Seventh-day Adventists; Lutheran Church ; Jehovah's Witnesses

<sup>94</sup> Armenian Apostolic Church; Catholic Church; Russian Pentecostals; Baptist Church; 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventists; Lutheran Church; Jehovah's Witnesses

<sup>95</sup> MARIG is part of the project carried out by the International Center on Conflict and Negotiation, funded by the Dutch charity organization Cordaid. The movement was established in February 2003 as a response to extremist acts conducted by Vasili Mkalavishvili and his followers.

*inter alia*, the attitude taken by the media during the acts of violence which were occurring at that time:

Arnold STPANIAIN, *head of the NGO the Multi Ethnic Resource Center of Civic Education in Georgia*: “Today, the mass-media is playing a highly negative role [on the issue of religious minorities]. Just two years ago, I had the feeling that our media was a democratic achievement but I have to admit I was wrong. Free press does not exist in Georgia. Moreover, mass-media is a tool of various political forces that use them for personal benefits, thus it is no surprise the Georgian mass-media is reinforcing the negative elements in the society...”<sup>96</sup>

Basil KOBAKHIDZE *the Georgian Orthodox Church*: “Very unfortunately, the majority of journalists lack adequate education. Also, people analyzing serious issues are either too young or unskilled. Today, journalists of 18-20 years old are responsible for analyzing the major processes that are taking place in the country. Naturally, individuals who have very little experience cannot write professionally. Again, the lack of education paves the way to religious extremism, which is very dangerous. The incorrect understanding of patriotism and of what pure Orthodoxy should be like can bring the Georgian society to catastrophic results.”<sup>97</sup>

“Malkhaz SONGULASHVILI, *the Baptist Church of Georgia*: “Going back to the issues I touched upon concerning the first question, the Soviet heritage is extremely hard [to break]. Basically speaking, there is a severe lack of journalists who are competent in religious matters. Moreover, in many cases media becomes the source of religious intolerance. Taking into account the popularity enjoyed by TV, it would be wise to pay more attention to TV programs as the words/ideas received via TV networks have power over the people. Our journalists lack professionalism and the majority of the media workers are oriented towards the market. This is natural for any media. However, the difference between Georgian journalists and those from the developed countries lies in the level of professionalism. In Europe or the United States, journalists manage to give an objective and professional evaluation, presenting the work in a way that goes in line with both the actual state of affairs and the commercial demands of the society. In Georgia, the poor level of journalism is often the cause of tensions, confrontation and hatred. Another problem I would like to address is that of a religion as a taboo. I remember young journalist telling me about her first experience in the field of mass-media where she was instructed to avoid discussing or covering three topics: casinos, the drug business, and the Eastern Orthodox Church. Naturally, as long as religious issues remain as taboos, there cannot be the freedom of religion.”<sup>98</sup>

Nodar LADARIA, *press-ombudsman of the newspaper "24 hours"*: “Again, I would use the key word, which is ignorance. Journalists do not know how to speak or write about [religious issues]. Also, they are often influenced by individual priests, which affect their thinking, making them unable to evaluate the situation objectively.

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<sup>96</sup> Marig-A.S.

<sup>97</sup> Marig – B.K.

<sup>98</sup> Marig – M.S.

Interestingly, ignorance causes both the passiveness of mass media, as well as its excessive involvement in the subject. In the end, I would like to draw your attention to the problem I mentioned earlier which is the lack of education and information among the priests. Unlike Russia, which has a certain number of priests who carry the seeds of modernity and innovation, Georgian priests rarely combine religious education with the modern one".<sup>99</sup>

Ramaz SAKVARELIDZE, Member of the Department of the General Psychology of Tbilisi State University: "It may sound strange, but the religious topic in Georgia is subject to censorship. All other topics, including politics, economics, culture, etc. are censor-free. As a journalist, you can criticize your government, the governments of other countries, domestic and foreign politicians, etc. However, you have to be extremely careful when addressing religious issues. The censorship existed earlier as well, but it is now getting much stronger. One of the reasons behind this interesting fact is the general mood in the society, i.e. the media tries to be in line with the majority of people. Second, Georgians, on this very stage of state-building, are influenced by social trends. Today, we are in the phase of intolerance and the media is trying to suit the general opinion.".<sup>100</sup>

Ghia NODIA, *Caucasus Institute for Peace Democracy and Development*: "It's a well-known fact that the Georgian mass-media is free. However, free mass-media will not necessarily defend liberal ideas as some might think. Rather, free mass-media reflects the moods and opinions of the masses, as it is an inseparable part of society. Today, the majority of journalists fear the newly emerging religious movements. This affects their quality of work. There are individual journalists who think differently though (but their number is very low)."<sup>101</sup>

Today the attitude of the media has not improved, according to Lela Kartvelishvili from the International Center on Conflict and Negotiation:

"The mass media are non-objective at all. They support the Georgian Orthodox Church. If some events take place with the GOC all channels will cover them and make major reports on it. This also comes from the part of public channels - although they are financed by taxes that are paid by everyone, including by religious minorities. One part of our activities is trying to involve the media. But if some events take place with any other churches, one needs to try hard in order to get a few seconds on the events broadcast only at midday. They do broadcast it still, but it is the result of hard work. One private channel, *Mze*, has a program called taboo that discusses tabooed issues. We wrote to ask them to dedicate one to religious ecumenism. We received no answer from them."<sup>102</sup>

In its report for the first six months of 2005 the Public Defender noted:

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<sup>99</sup> Marig – N.L.

<sup>100</sup> Marig – R.S.

<sup>101</sup> Marig – G.N.

<sup>102</sup> ICCN 2006

“In the process of the creation of a culture of tolerance, media can play a main role. The basis for religious extremism is the lack of information. The public has to be objectively informed about the issues touching on the relationship between different religions. The cooperation of religious minorities with the media will help bring the taboo issues to the open, to the general public and will assist in providing realistic information regarding different religions. Dealing with this issue requires a very delicate approach and accuracy. But unfortunately, for years Georgian mass media have been the main source of creating negative stereotypes on religious minorities.”<sup>103</sup>

In the subsequent report for the first six months of 2006, he noted no improvement in this regard:

“The Georgian media did not take into account criticism from the previous report with regard to objectivity. Their attitude amounts to discrimination. In this respect, the Public Defender’s tolerance center will publish in the near future the results of the monitoring dedicated to ethnic and religious issues. At present, there is no TV or radio channel which would be interested in dedicating some programs on the issue of tolerance with regard to religious minorities. One exception is the public TV channel, which since 2006 has had a 20 minute program “Our Georgia” which talks about issues relating to ethnic and religious minorities.”<sup>104</sup>

### **Comments by Religious Minorities on Attitude of Media**

#### *Catholic Church*

“I don’t think there is any freedom of press in Georgia when it comes to religious issues. I give you an example. Once a journalist told me: ‘You are right to say that but I cannot publish it.’ This is how the situation is.”

#### *Apostolic Armenian Church*

“The media play a very bad role in ethnic and religious issues today. I remember once after an interview they broadcast that the Armenian Apostolic Church claimed 600 churches. This is of course impossible, so it was taken as a provocation by people. What I told him is that we claim six churches. 600 was the number of religious buildings that were built throughout the fifteen centuries of presence of the Armenian Apostolic Church in Georgia. Really, 90 percent of them don’t talk objectively. [...] Why? They do not give us an answer. I think they do not really care about improving inter-religious relation.”

#### *Baptist Church*

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<sup>103</sup> Public Defender 2005 – 2

<sup>104</sup> Public Defender 2006 - 1

“Mass media – they do what they are told to do. Any other country has programs on poverty but here they show, without any criticism, how the GOC bought a house for 800 000 dollars and spent 150 000 dollars to put gold on the dome of the cathedral. Not one journalist thinks of questioning the sums spent... or when the President baptizes his son as if he were the prince of the Byzantine Empire. Nobody asks anything. [...] Media takes an ironic stance most of the time when they talk about religious minorities.”

#### *Jehovah Witnesses*

“Mass media – we notice recently more attention paid to religious minorities but usually they are trying to avoid the issue.”

#### *Seventh-day Adventists*

“In March 2005 we re-transmitted a satellite program from Kiev by the Adventist channel Hope. The TV Channel Rustavi 2 came and made a report. They did not really say anything bad, but the tone itself was very awful. Then they took an interview from the Patriarchate, who said that we are a very dangerous and harmful sect. Then nine articles were published in different newspapers on the negative influence of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and the threats it allegedly poses. Then the issue was talked about in a known Internet forum, the main idea of the comments being “let’s kill all of them”. To be Protestant in Georgia means to be under pressure. Somehow we are persecuted, but not openly.”

#### *Russian Pentecostals*

“Mass media try to create more problems. It is in their interest. [...] Mass media played a negative role in [the acts of violence of] 2000. All newspaper and TV [stations] state that [non-traditional minorities] are abnormal psychologically. The authorities say the same. People choose to believe that.”

### **3.3 Religious Minorities and Georgian Orthodox Church<sup>105</sup>**

#### **3.3.1 Influence of Orthodox Church on Georgian Society**

It is interesting to have a look at the attitude of the Georgian Patriarchate toward religious minorities, as the Georgian Orthodox Church influence on society is strong.<sup>106</sup> The 2001 UNAIDS report gives an analysis of the attitude of the role of the Orthodox Church in society with regard to the AIDS problem in Georgia:

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<sup>105</sup> USSD 2005; FILDH 2005; Public Defender 2006 – 1; ICCN 2006; USCIRF 2006; AI 2005; Civil 2005.12.25; Forum 18 – 2005.11.25; RFE/RL – 2003.07.29; Marig-A.S; Marig – B.K; Marig – M.S; Marig – N.L  
: Marig – R.S; Marig – G.N; Public Defender 2005 – 2; Public Defender 2006 – 1; Georgian Orthodox Church ; Russian Pentecostals; Seventh-day Adventists; Muslim Community; Jehovah’s Witnesses; Baptist Church; Catholic Church

<sup>106</sup> USSD 2006; FILDH 2005; Public Defender 2006 – 1; ICCN 2006

“The major religious confession in Georgia is the Georgian Orthodox Church. Its influence has significantly increased in the past decade, which is supported by the government. Also there is a consolidation of a fundamental tendency in the Orthodox Church of Georgia [...]. Historically, the Apostolic Orthodox Church was and is the guide for the moral and cultural criteria of society in Georgia. Since the fourth century A.D., the Orthodox Church has formed the orientation of Georgian society and influencing the standards of moral life. The propaganda of atheism of the last century and so-called ‘free life’ disrupted all balances in society. A great majority of religious fathers preach that today a human being earns a penalty for such a life. The Georgian Apostolic Orthodox Church demands from people to follow the moral standards of the Ten Commandments.”<sup>107</sup>

This being said, the “link between the country's Orthodoxy and ethnic and national identity”<sup>108</sup> appears to be more important than the religious role of the Orthodox Church, as many residents are not particularly observant<sup>109</sup>. The Georgian Orthodox Church acts as “a constituent ideological element in the construction of a national Georgian identity”<sup>110</sup>, a particularly important theme since the independence of Georgia.<sup>111</sup> Some comments from Zurab Tskhovebadze, the spokesman for the Georgian Patriarchate, about the failure at the last minute to sign an agreement between the Vatican and Georgia due to massive demonstrations from society seem to go in this direction:

“It is not our business to deal with state affairs. But the rights of the majority of the population must be respected. 84 percent of people belong to the GOC. Therefore one must pay attention to this issue. Orthodoxy has played an immense role in Georgian history - Georgia has been invaded for centuries and attempts were made to make us change religion. A lot of people were killed, a lot of martyrs. It is a very delicate topic even today, particularly after the persecutions during the Soviet period. [...].”<sup>112</sup>

In 2003 the British Theatre Guide reported a case involving the Orthodox Church’s attitude toward a theatre play allegedly containing homosexual scenes and its subsequent cancellation:

“The Wales' Volcano Theatre Company was in the centre of a censorship row in Tbilisi, Georgia, when they became the first British performing arts company to play in the former Soviet Republic. Their production L.O.V.E., a radical adaptation of Shakespeare's Love Sonnets, caused protests and walkouts on its first night because of homosexual scenes and the two subsequent performances were cancelled by the theatre after threats of violent protests. Leading the protests was the Georgian Orthodox Church which ran radio commercials warning people not to see the show.”<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> UNAid 2001

<sup>108</sup> USSD 2006

<sup>109</sup> USSD 2006; Baptist Church

<sup>110</sup> FILDH 2005

<sup>111</sup> See in this respect the part on causes of negative attitude toward religious minorities in this report

<sup>112</sup> Georgian Orthodox Church

<sup>113</sup> BTG 2003

Speaking about the incident, Gogi Gvakharia, a prominent TV journalist in Georgia, found the strong influence of the Church on Georgian society deplorable:

"It's as if words like love, compassion, and compromise have fallen from the Church's vocabulary. Now the emphasis is on words like the law of God, hell, and Satan. Religion and ignorance have become close associates. People are afraid that if they say they don't believe or if they don't visit their local priest something bad will happen to their children. The clergy are scaring them to think in this way. And because these people have no real faith or spiritual values, they believe it when they hear of plots against the Church or that Jehovah's Witnesses want to destroy the Church."<sup>114</sup>

In fall 2004 an official in the Ministry of Sport, Culture and Heritage solicited the opinion of the Patriarch about the legitimacy of Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and the appropriateness of CRS's newly launched Building for the Future program, a five-year program works to empower the youth of Georgia with the skills and knowledge to build inter-ethnic understanding, to practice democratic and free-market values, and to assess and meet some of their communities' needs.. At about the same time, some politicians openly criticized CRS and questioned whether its programs were intended to "catholicize" the youth. However, in response, the Patriarch held a cordial meeting with CRS representatives in June 2005 during which he praised CRS programs and suggested regular meetings between the GOC and CRS to allay community fears.<sup>115</sup>

Recently the Public Defender stated in its last report that "generally speaking, the point of view of the Patriarchate is shared by society."<sup>116</sup> This statement was followed by the account of a recent example on how a statement from the Georgian Patriarchate can have a direct influence on society in Georgia. This relates to a meeting of the International Federation for World Peace and Unification<sup>117</sup> which was supposed to be held in Tbilisi in June 2006 along with the visit of one of its main leaders to Georgia. After a declaration of the Georgian Patriarchate's office stating that this organization is a totalitarian sect and asking people not to attend their meeting, the two main theatres in Tbilisi, which had previously agreed to host the event, eventually returned the sum already paid to the organization. After several other places also refused to host the event, both the meeting and the visit of the organization's leader were cancelled.

### **3.3.2 Role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Matters of Religious Intolerance**

With regard to the attitude of the GOC toward religious minorities, one should distinguish the Patriarchate on one side and Orthodox priests on the other. In fact, it was reported that many cases of religious intolerance and religious violence are led by or at least involve local Orthodox priests,<sup>118</sup> while it is at the same time acknowledged that the

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<sup>114</sup> RFE/RL 2003.07.30

<sup>115</sup> USCIRF 2005

<sup>116</sup> Public Defender 2006 - 1

<sup>117</sup> Better known as "Moonism", its founder is Sun Myung Moon

<sup>118</sup> USSD 2006; AI 2005; ICCN 2006; RFE/RL – 2003.07.29; Catholic Church; Baptist Church; Jehovah's Witnesses; Seventh-day Adventists; Russian Pentecostals

Patriarchate never publicly supports those acts.<sup>119</sup> Rather, the reproach generally directed at the Patriarchate is that it does not take a clear position concerning such acts. The representatives of religious minorities say that the Patriarchate generally keeps silent unless something very grave happens, and without punishing those priests responsible.<sup>120</sup>

In 2003, the above mentioned interviews conducted by MARIG also addressed the issue of the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Georgian Patriarchate:

Arnold STPANIAIN *the Multi-ethnic Georgia*: "Personally, I see the role of the Patriarchate as negative. The Orthodox Church resembles a political party in its structure and behavior. Unfortunately, there is a certain percentage of people who belong to the so-called extremist category while the Patriarchate and the mainstream Church do very little to inhibit their activity. However, due to the deep-rooted role of the mainstream Church in the Georgian society, the Patriarch of Georgia does manage to carry out balanced politics and preserve the positive image of the country on an international arena. Taking in account the multi-ethnic character of the country, I would say that a person demonstrating active dislike towards religious minorities in Georgia is either insane or involved in certain political games."<sup>121</sup>

Basil KOBAKHIDZE *the Georgian Orthodox Church*: "Importantly, the majority of the abovementioned 'extremist' statements are made in the name of the Eastern Orthodox Church, while the Patriarchate and the mainstream Church make only nominal statements to protest this violence, thus reinforcing the already negative attitude towards minorities. Here, one should note that individuals engaged in religious extremism are not only the so-called 'priests in exile' but some of the politicians or priests representing the Georgian state and the Orthodox Church [...] the Patriarchate is reinforcing religious extremism. So far, nothing has been done on the part of the mainstream Church or the Patriarchate to stop the violence against the religious sects/minority groups."<sup>122</sup>

Malkhaz SONGHULASHVILI, *the Baptist Church of Georgia*: "The Patriarchate and the Church consist of people, not aliens. Importantly, these people carry all the seeds we inherited from our past. Going back to the issue of heritage, I must say that the heritage of those representing the Church and the Patriarchate is of a totalitarian nature. Very unfortunately, the Patriarchate did not succeed in overcoming this heritage within itself (which was not easy, of course). Today, the Church is tempted by the opportunities it has in society (opportunities to gain privileges, etc). However, the Patriarchate should have imagined that in the long run, the Church will benefit only if it contributes to building a civil society, rather than going the way of isolationism."

Finally, I would like to say a few words about the Patriarch of Georgia. I believe he experiences certain pressure from the Patriarchate that puts constraints on his activity. I would even suggest that his Beatitude is a slave of his surroundings. If it was his

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid

<sup>120</sup> Ibid

<sup>121</sup> Marig-A.S.

<sup>122</sup> Marig – B.K.

Beatitude deciding on all major issues, the way we would go would have been much more progressive.”

Generally speaking, the period we are going thought now will be one of the saddest pages in the history of Georgia...”<sup>123</sup>

Nodar LADARIA *press-ombudsman of the newspaper "24 hours"*: “Both the mainstream Church and the Patriarchate are passive. This can again be explained by two factors. The Georgian Church regards its role as strongly tied with the State. On the other hand, the Georgian state claims to be democratic, i.e. secular. The clash of the two interests causes passiveness...”<sup>124</sup>

Ramaz SAKVARELIDZE, *Tbilisi State University*: “The role of the Patriarchate is quite negative, as it chose neutrality over active involvement. Today, neither the Patriarchate nor the mainstream Church are taking part in the conflict, but the neutrality they demonstrate is actually the cause of the present confrontation. Let me explain this statement: The role of the Patriarch is that of a leader who is under constant pressure from his surrounding. The Patriarch made a few very independent and positive steps on the eve of Georgian independence. Later, he had to divert from the progressive politics since his ideas faced resistance from the Synod.”<sup>125</sup>

Ghia NODIA, *Caucasus Institute for Peace Democracy and Development*: “The Patriarchate's approach to religious minorities resembles, in many ways, the approach of the masses. The fundamentalist movement is on the rise while the head of the Patriarchate is trying to maintain the balance, engaging in moderate politics. Historically, the Georgian Church has always turned to the State for security, thus one could say that the mainstream Church has always been dependant on the State. This explains the fear the Orthodox clergy have in terms of the new religious movements and sects... Although the official position in the Soviet era was atheism the mainstream Church had a defined position that guaranteed security in the long run. Today, the Orthodox Church insists on the protection on the part of the State that will guarantee the former's position in society. The growing fear and the insecurity of the masses lead to xenophobia. Interestingly, as the mainstream Church is dependant on the State, it both reinforces the negative feelings towards the religious minorities and, at the same time, tries to find the balance, i.e. it is not fully extremist. Moreover, one could argue that the actual extremist movement takes place separately from the mainstream Church.”<sup>126</sup>

This is also the view held today by Giuseppe Pasotto, head of the Catholic community in Tbilisi. In talking about the presence of Orthodox priests in incidents of religious nature, he said:

“Yes, some priests are within those groups. I think it is a problem inside the GOC. They should fix the problem inside the GOC first and then it would help. They should define a

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<sup>123</sup> Marig – M.S.

<sup>124</sup> Marig – N.L.

<sup>125</sup> Marig – R.S.

<sup>126</sup> Marig – G.N.

clear position toward us that would be heard by all. But nothing is done in this respect.”<sup>127</sup>

However, the Georgian Orthodox Church disagrees with this view. In 2003, Father Davit Sharashenidze, then a head of the Georgian Orthodox Church's press office, stated that that the Church is not involved in violence of any sort:

“The Church has nothing to do with violence [against religious minorities]. You won't find any evidence of the Church calling on people to use force against anyone. It says the only legitimate form of struggle is words.”<sup>128</sup>

Today, Zurab Tskhovebadze, the spokesman for the GOC, concurs:

“The cases of aggression come from the part of people who are not religious or who have just started to be religious. The fact is that if they had been religious they would not have been aggressive. The GOC has practiced tolerance throughout its history. It had a big role in that. And Society is tolerant too. In Georgian culture the idea that no one should be forced to religious conversion is important. We still remember that many tried to force us to convert to Islam. We do not want to do the same to others. Conversion is done through love and not through violence. Basil Mkalavishvili [the main leader of cases of religious violence, now in jail] was defrocked in 1985. Reports from NGOs often forgot to indicate that fact. He was an awful person and psychologically abnormal. We had the impression that he was supported by some political force. I don't know which one. It should be noted that he was also aggressive toward the Church. No one abroad recorded in their reports that he had carried out several attacks on Orthodox priests. I myself was almost attacked by them three times. [Asked about common perception that the Patriarchate did not and does not condemn acts of religious violence] I have been a representative of the press service of the Patriarchate during the years and we condemned the acts of violence through declarations of the Patriarchate. But more attention was paid to the declarations of NGOs and religious minorities than ours. Those reports are one-sided. [Asked if the Patriarchate punishes local priests involved in religious intolerance, particularly with regard to two active groups today, the Society of Saint David the Builder, and the Union of Orthodox Parents] I have heard of those groups. But facts and evidence of the involvement of priests are very rarely available. Usually there is no evidence. They are not organizations of the Patriarchate. But there are religious people among them. The official position of the Patriarchate is that we are not linked to these aggressions. What I can say is that the Patriarch is a model for most, but unfortunately not for all.”<sup>129</sup>

### **Comments by Religious Minorities on Role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Matters of Religious Intolerance**

#### *Catholic Church*

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<sup>127</sup> Catholic Church

<sup>128</sup> RFE /RL– 2003.07.29

<sup>129</sup> Georgian Orthodox Church

“We are not really targeted by religious violence. [Asked about the presence of local priests in those groups who incite religious violence] Yes, some priests are within those groups. I think it is a problem inside the GOC. It would help if they fix the problem in the GOC first. They should define a clear position toward us that would be heard by all. But nothing is done in this respect.”

*Baptist Church*

“Orthodox religion has no impact on the lives of people, and if it does, it is always negative and takes the form of indoctrination. It loses what Georgian identity is originally made up of.”

*Muslim Community*

“We have good relations with the GOC.”

*Jehovah’s Witnesses*

“Religious intolerance is mainly instigated by the GOC - for example, in Rustavi on 16 November 2006. The GOC, through the [national TV channel] Rustavi 2, announced that they would never allow the JW to have religious buildings. And the attacks started after that. Attacks were led by a local GOC priest but the Patriarch kept silent. And when some GOC representatives give interviews, they are always negatively portrayed. Everything started with representatives of the [Orthodox] Church. While Basil Mkalavishvili was defrocked, the priests who still belong to the GOC have never been punished.”

*Seventh-day Adventists*

“The problems come from local priests. I think we have a very good Patriarch but the Patriarch and the Patriarchate can hold different views”

*Russian Pentecostals*

“If groups of extremists don’t incite people, then people don’t care. Orthodoxy is not a reactionary religion and religious violence is not a mass phenomenon [in Georgia]. When an attack on our Church happens it involves some active groups of 30 – 40 people. There is always a GOC priest among them. The GOC does not condemn those acts. Or it rarely does. I think the reason is that if they judge them they will be judged back. It is a kind of spiritual patriotism. They don’t want to put themselves into a difficult situation.”

### **3.4 Attitude of Society toward Religious Minorities<sup>130</sup>**

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<sup>130</sup> ICCN 2006; USSD 2006; CEN 2005; RFE/RL – 2003.07.29; USCIRF 2006; FILDH 2005; Marig-A.S; Marig – B.K.; Marig – M.S.; Marig – N.L; Marig – R.S; Marig – G.N; Public Defender 2006 – 1; Forum 18 – 2006.11.10; IHFHR 2006; Public Defender 2005 – 2; Muslim Community; Jehovah’s Witnesses; Seventh-day Adventists; Russian Pentecostals

The attitude of society toward religious minorities is widely described as being historically tolerant with regard to the “traditional faiths”<sup>131</sup> but negative or very negative against “non-traditional faiths.”

The tradition of religious tolerance in Georgian society toward the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Catholic Church, and the Jewish and Muslim communities, which can be seen in the churches, mosques and synagogues existing side by side in the old quarter of Tbilisi, is a fact confirmed by the representatives of different faiths interviewed.<sup>132</sup>

Giuseppe Pasotto noted, though, religious intolerance is still much seen, particularly in the cities, he noticed some demonstration of intolerance in the regions, particularly against children at school which “did not used to happen before.”<sup>133</sup> Some other incidents were reported involving Catholics that show intolerance does sometimes occur against traditional groups, although it comes from the part of particular extremist groups and not from society at large.<sup>134</sup>

By contrast, the negative or very negative perception toward so-called non-traditional faiths is repeatedly reported by opinion polls as well as by reports focusing on religious minorities.<sup>135</sup>

In 2003 the Institute of Policy Studies in Tbilisi carried out a survey on change of gender and generation roles in a transitional society, the main focus of which was aimed at “describing value profiles of young adults as compared to those of their parents, assessing the attitudes toward such issues as independence, traditions, equality, gender, tolerance towards minorities.” In 176 families located in Tbilisi, young unmarried persons aged 18-22 as well as their parents were interviewed separately, giving a total of 528 respondents, i.e. three members of each of 176 families. The results showed a generational continuity or unchanged values. In addition, the report emphasizes the particular issue of tolerance toward Jehovah’s Witnesses, “one of the most controversial religious groups active in Georgia.” From the results, tolerance toward “Jehovah’s Witnesses” was expressed by 14.9 percent of young and 14.3 percent of older respondents.<sup>136</sup>

A 2004 survey carried out by the Tbilisi-based International Centre on Conflict and Negotiation shows that nearly 47 percent of respondents said they would support destroying religious minorities’ literature, while only 10 percent would defend religious minorities’ rights. Nearly 44 percent of respondents believed that if Georgia was to adopt a religion law, it should ban the activity of “sects”, such as the Baptists and Jehovah’s Witnesses, with a further 34 percent believing it should restrict their activities. More than 20 percent of the population believed such a law should ban the activities of Catholics, Muslims and other faiths regarded as more traditional, with a further 38 percent believing

<sup>131</sup> ICCN 2006; USSD 2006; CEN 2005; RFE/RL – 2003.07.29; USCIRF 2006; Gorgadze 1917; Marig-A.S; Marig – R.S; FILDH 2005

<sup>132</sup> Muslim Community; Catholic Church; Armenian Apostolic Church

<sup>133</sup> Catholic Church

<sup>134</sup> See part on religious violence

<sup>135</sup> ICCN 2006; USSD 2006; USCIRF 2006; UK Home Office – 2005; FILDH 2005; RFE /RL – 2003.07.29; Marig-A.S.; Marig – B.K.; Marig – M.S; Jehovah’s Witnesses; Seventh-day Adventists; Russian Pentecostals

<sup>136</sup> IPS 2003

it should restrict their activity. Only 25 percent believed such "traditional" faiths should be fully protected with only just over 6 percent believing that "sects" should also be fully protected.<sup>137</sup>

Gocha Tskitishvili, the director of Tbilisi's Institute of Polling and Marketing in Georgia (IPM) stated in July 2003:

"About 12 percent of the people of Tbilisi think that what Father Basil [Mkalavishvili, the main author of the acts of violence between 1999 and 2003] does is absolutely right, [...] a further 60 percent disapprove of his methods but think that his ideas are right. In other words, the Jehovah's Witnesses should be opposed, but it isn't necessary to beat them up."<sup>138</sup>

This negative attitude of the population can also be seen in the media who rarely took, and still do not take, an objective angle when discussing non-traditional denominations (see 3.3 Media and Religious Minorities).

Some of the representatives interviewed and recent reports concerning religious minorities state that the end of the period of violence against religious minorities does not mean that there has been any improvement in the view of society toward non-traditional religious minorities.<sup>139</sup> It is rather due to the prosecution of the main authors of those attacks. The Public Defender in its report for the first part of 2006 acknowledged that the "tolerance rate in the country [against non-traditional denominations] is still low."<sup>140</sup>

### **3.5 Religious Minorities and Social Stigma**

In the context of negative social attitudes toward non-traditional religious minorities, it was interesting to ask the representatives of the Baptist Church, the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Russian Pentecostal Church whether people adhering to their congregation felt the need to hide their religious convictions. However, Malkhaz Songulashvili from the Baptist Church said that in general he did not notice that Baptists tried to conceal their faiths even if there are such cases in "upper and middle classes," as he noticed they "hid from the camera when TV stations reported on the Church."<sup>141</sup> According to Genadi Genadze, the representative of Watchtower in Georgia, Jehovah's Witnesses "do not hide their religious conviction from neighbors or at their workplaces."<sup>142</sup> Russian Pentecostals also stated that it is not a general attitude even if "there might be some individual cases, for example, when people apply for a job."<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> forum 18 – 2005.05.24

<sup>138</sup> RFE /RL– 2003.07.29

<sup>139</sup> Forum 18 – 2006.11.10; Jehovah's Witnesses; Seventh-day Adventists; Russian Pentecostals

<sup>140</sup> Public Defender 2005 - 2

<sup>141</sup> Baptist Church

<sup>142</sup> Jehovah's Witnesses

<sup>143</sup> Russian Pentecostals

### **3.6 Religious Intolerance and Social Context**

The results of the research show that two main causes seem to underlie the negative attitude of society - the low level of religious culture of society and the importance of the protection of national and cultural values since Georgia's independence. Additionally, the idea that the economic hardship of the population plays a role has been put forward. Finally, we notice acquiescence from the part of those actors that could change this social context. In this context, representatives of the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Muslim community suggested that Jehovah's Witnesses were themselves responsible for the intolerance of which they were victims.

#### **3.6.1 Lack of Knowledge about Non-traditional Religious Groups**

When the situation in Georgia was being examined by the United Nations Human Rights Committee in 2002, the Committee recommended that Georgia conducts a public awareness campaign on religious tolerance and prevents, through education, intolerance and discrimination based on religious belief. The Rapporteur said that intolerance, the nationalistic speeches of politicians, and Orthodox extremists nurture "the profound ignorance" which Georgians have of religions other than Orthodoxy.<sup>144</sup>

In a MARIG series of interviews in 2003, Nodar Ladaria, the press-ombudsman of the newspaper "24 hours", and Malkhaz Songulashvili from the Baptist Church of Georgia, when explaining the reasons for religious intolerance, also insisted on the lack of knowledge in society:

Nodar Ladaria: "Let me start by pointing out the major problem our society faces today: Ignorance. Unfortunately, very few can understand the meaning of human rights. In the majority of cases, the understanding of the notion is inadequate, as one can notice from the statements made by some politicians and state representatives. On the popular level, people lack information on religious subjects, thus a person telling you he/she adheres to Eastern Orthodoxy has a rather vague understanding of what Eastern Orthodoxy represents in reality. I would underline two main reasons that cause low levels of religious freedom in Georgia. The first reason is the absence of information/education on a popular level. Unfortunately, very few priests are skilled enough to spread their knowledge among the people. The second reason is the inability of our society to build a state based on the political, rather than religious, interests."<sup>145</sup>

Malkhaz Songulashvili: "If I was to name the reasons that led to the problem, I would point to the cultural factor. Unfortunately, the cultural level of our society is still low [...]. The solution to the problem lies in educating the people. This goal is very difficult to accomplish though. Georgians arrived at the 21st century with a heavy burden of the Soviet past. Naturally, it is impossible to bring enlightenment to all, as the deeply rooted Soviet heritage puts obstacles on each and every stage. However, there is always a way out. I would suggest two plans: A long-term and a short-term one, which can dramatically

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<sup>144</sup> UNCHR 2003

<sup>145</sup> Marig – N.L.

improve the state of our society. The long-term plan should aim at reforming the educational sphere. The Ministry of Education, universities, schools, etc., should all engage in educating the masses. Special attention should be paid to the law-enforcement structures. Through education, the police should finally realize that Brezhnev is dead. In other words, what we should concentrate on is to reform the mentality of the people. The short-term plan implies changes in the media. As we all know, TV, press and radio enjoy great popularity among the masses, thus the content of the programs will directly influence the thinking of the society.”<sup>146</sup>

Today, “ignorance”, “lack of education”, “poor knowledge”, “and misinformation” were the reasons advanced by the respondents when attempting to explain this general negative attitude against non-traditional groups:

### **Comments on Lack of Knowledge about Non-traditional Religious Groups**

#### *International Center on Conflict and Negotiation*

“There is an important lack of knowledge in society on these issues. They believe some things but in the end don’t know much about those groups. For example, all denominations are considered to be Jehovah Witnesses. There is no clear idea on who those groups really are. By the way, educated people usually don’t have problems with regard to those groups.”

#### *Catholic Church*

“I think it has to do with ignorance. Religious culture in Georgia is very low. And some people who don’t want to work toward the unity of the country use this ignorance. They tell lies to people about other faiths to worsen the situation. It is conservatism but an ignorant conservatism, meaning that people have some negative ideas about other religious groups, not based on particular convictions but without really knowing why. Georgia has been a closed society for a long time and tolerance and knowledge come with openness. I think there is a lot to do in the future to improve religious culture and to advocate for religious diversity. When you see diversity as your enemy, like now, improvement is not possible.”

#### *Baptist Church*

“For me the reasons explaining society’s attitude toward religious minorities is the general lack of education of the population on religious issues.”

#### *Jehovah’s Witnesses*

“The lack of knowledge and lack of education in society about who we are seems to be the main reason of this negative attitude.”

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<sup>146</sup> Marig – M.S.

### *Seventh-day Adventists*

“in society’s opinion, all those who do not belong to Orthodoxy are considered sectarians. [...] somehow, we are still [living] in communism. If you don’t know anything about religion and only get information from the national media, then today in Georgia you have no way of becoming tolerant. Priests say the same as the media, and vice versa. I think very few people open their dictionary to find out who we are, and sometimes I find some biased definition even in a dictionary. One has to keep in mind the origin of this attitude, our communist background. There was no religious education. Now when people want to know about us or any social issue, they cannot follow what the communist structures say, so instead they ask their priest. For my part I find atheist literature much less negative than the Orthodox one.”

### *Russian Pentecostals*

“Society was convinced during the Soviet period that we were bad people. ‘Those people bring their kids to sacrifice, hide to do their religious service. I have seen the police arrest them’. Then mass media add to this misinformation. It may be a problem of education, but history shows otherwise. There used to be tolerance.”

#### **3.6.2 Nationalism vs. Religious Minorities**

The USSD 2006 report noted that “many members of the GOC and the public viewed religious minorities, especially the non-traditional groups of evangelical Protestants or so-called ‘sects,’ as a threat to the national Church and the country's cultural values.”<sup>147</sup>

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom of 2006 concurs:

“Public opinion polls continue to show that a majority of Georgians view minority or new religious groups as a threat to the GOC and national cultural values, and that violence against and the prohibition of such groups would be acceptable, according to the State Department’s 2005 human rights report.”<sup>148</sup>

In 2003, Salome Asatiani, then Professor of Sociology at Tbilisi State University and freelance journalist for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, held the opinion that:

“The state of society is very intolerant at the moment [...] I think it goes back to the birth of the so-called national liberation movement. The Soviet ideology was replaced very quickly by nationalist rhetoric with all its implications -- the revival of religion, the representation of the national ideal or national traditions as the unquestioned pattern that should be followed. It’s Georgian-ness which is promoted, and anything else -- ethnic, political, or sexual or in any other factors -- is directly marginalized.”<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> USSD 2006

<sup>148</sup> USCIRF 2006

<sup>149</sup> RFE/RL 2003.07.29

The same opinion was expressed by Goga Gvakharia, prominent Georgian TV journalist:

“So where is this intolerance coming from? Commentator Gvakharia believes insecurity lies at the heart of the problem: ‘In periods of crisis like this, people always look for scapegoats’. Tolerance genuinely has been a characteristic of the Georgian people, but the ability to be self-critical hasn’t. It’s easier to create monsters than to blame oneself -- and today foreigners fill that role. Of course, our Soviet mentality plays a big part in this, but the other thing is the speed of the foreign invasion of Georgia. The suddenness of the appearance of new ideas, products, and so on is helping spread the view that everything that comes from the West is either rubbish or disgusting.”<sup>150</sup>

In 2003, while answering to MARIG’s series of interviews, Basil KOBAKHIDZE, a priest of the Georgian Orthodox Church, concurred:

“Over the past years, various politicians and priests have created religious nationalism by attaching negative labels to religious minority groups (referring to them as anti-Georgian, anti-religious, etc). A good example can be found in the open letter of the Patriarch of Georgia, who blames the Georgian intelligentsia for cooperating with the outside enemy that is aimed at ruining the Georgian Orthodox Church.”<sup>151</sup>

In the same series of interviews, Ramaz Sakvarelidze, a professor at Tbilisi State University, also points to nationalism as a cause for religious intolerance:

“Historically, Georgians had to demonstrate tolerance towards religious and minority groups. However, as soon as Georgia gained independence, the historical memory disappeared, making Georgians hostile to groups that are different from the majority. Georgians saw freedom as an opportunity to do whatever they please. In other words, as soon as Georgians gained power they started applying it in the wrong way, harming the national interests. And just like the inhabitants of small countries, Georgians have mystified their country, claiming it had an exclusive status or a role that had no place for the ‘outsiders’...”<sup>152</sup>

Today, Malkhaz Songulashvili lists nationalism, together with the general lack of knowledge, as an explanation of the negative religious attitude:

“[...] There has been propaganda going on for the last 15 years. People were being told – if you are Georgian you are Orthodox and if not Orthodox you’re not Georgian. And this has not changed today. It is linked with the nationalist idea. Everyone’s proud to say that Georgia is a country of tolerance, but it is only rhetoric. We are post-Soviet children and accustomed to double standards and hypocrisy. Religion here has replaced communist ideology, and it is bad.”<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> RFE/RL 2003.07.29

<sup>151</sup> Marig – B.K.

<sup>152</sup> Marig – R.S.

<sup>153</sup> Baptist Church

### **3.6.3 Economic Hardship vs. Religious Minorities**

In the MARIG series of interviews in 2003, Ghia Nodia, a political analyst and a head of the Caucasus Institute for Peace Democracy and Development, was convinced that poverty leads people to look for “mystical reasons” for their problems:

“Why do people have such opinions? In order to answer this question, we have to look at the State which, very unfortunately, is very weak. The weakness of the State causes insecurity as people look for "mystical reasons" to explain the poverty they live in. In other words, people do not try to think rationally... Naturally, at difficult times, aggression of the masses is directed against the religious minorities.”<sup>154</sup>

Nikolai Kalutski, a head of the Russian Pentecostal Church, holds the same view:

“It has to do with poverty. People have to accuse someone. People use it. You accuse the other. When some people see that my house is better than theirs they say, “You are Russian and you’re doing better than me.” For me it is a strange comment since I was born here and always lived here. It is a leftover from the Soviet mentality. It is like this story at the end of the Soviet period: When people saw the shops are empty they said, “Who ate all our sausages?” The Georgians would say that it was the Russians. The Russians would say that it was the Georgians. When, in fact, poverty was to blame, since no sausages at all were produced.”<sup>155</sup>

In this context of economic difficulties, the USSD 2006 noted that “many citizens remained apprehensive about Protestants and other non-traditional religious groups, which they often viewed as taking advantage of the populace's economic hardship by gaining membership through economic assistance to converts.”<sup>156</sup> Zurab Tskhovebadze also commented in this sense about Jehovah’s Witnesses:

“People felt the economic situation going down after 1991-1992. We went through two conflicts. And they felt [Jehovah Witnesses] used it a lot [to their advantage]. They thought ‘It is hard for us so they want to buy us.’”<sup>157</sup>

### **3.6.4 Other Reasons Reported for Religious Intolerance, in Particular against Jehovah’s Witnesses**

When asked about his opinion on the reasons why there has been religious violence against non-traditional groups and in particular Jehovah Witnesses, Ali Aliev, a head of the Muslim community in Georgia, replied:

“Georgia is a tolerant country and they [followers of Jehovah’s Witnesses] are themselves at fault. They don’t belong to the history of the country. They are like

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<sup>154</sup> Marig – G.N.

<sup>155</sup> Russian Pentecostals

<sup>156</sup> USSD 2006

<sup>157</sup> Georgian Orthodox Church

Wahabbis; they want to change everything here and don't respect the local culture. They want to destroy everything from the past.”<sup>158</sup>

Zurab Tskhovebadze from the Patriarch's office, commenting on the same issue, holds a similar view:

“Which reasons can explain the negative attitude against some religious groups? That is a good question. Why were there good relations between faiths for so long and now they have deteriorated? Different people have different ideas. For my part, I see several reasons: We have lived under Soviet rule for years and somehow this tradition of co-existence has been forgotten. Then as soon as we got independence some new groups entered the country, and in particular Jehovah's Witnesses, which started active proselytism. They had a very radical attitude, insulted Georgian religious symbols and places. That caused anger from the side of society. Even if during that period, Georgians in general did not practice religion, they are nevertheless proud of their history, [to which the GOC is strongly linked] NGOs did not record cases of insults of icons and churches. I even know a case when one of them attacked a priest with an axe. It was six or seven years ago in Marvili. Criminal investigations started but with no serious consequence. He only had to testify that he would not do it again. [...] Besides, they played down the importance of independence of Georgia, and the problems with Abkhazia and South-Ossetia. We had to fight for those territories while at the same time they were saying, “Do not fight, and do not take up arms.” People just went crazy when they heard those things. There are also problems linked with blood transfusion. In one case one child died because their parents refused a blood transfusion. Also another case when an old man, who was himself not part of their congregation, by the way, died because his family rejected blood transfusion to him.”<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Muslim community

<sup>159</sup> Georgian Orthodox Church

## **4. ABUSES AND VIOLENCE**

### **4.1 Overview of Religious Violence during 1999-2003**

The period between 1999 and 2003 saw a significant increase in religious violence in Georgia. Non-traditional denominations as a whole were the victims of those attacks, Jehovah's Witnesses being particularly targeted. However some members of traditional faiths, such as Catholics, were also subjected to some attacks. The authors or instigators of those attacks belonged to mainly two groups: Basil Mkalavishvili, the defrocked GOC priest and his followers; and the "Jvari" (Cross) group, whose leader Paata Bluashvili acted through "exciting" the local population against religious minorities. This happened in the general context of complacency from the part of the authorities, the GOC, and society at large. Only the non-governmental sector spoke openly against religious fundamentalism and denounced these occurrences of religious violence by endorsing some protest demonstrations.<sup>160</sup> Concerning the exact number of attacks between 1999-2003, several numbers are found: 800 according to Jehovah Witnesses<sup>161</sup> and Forum 18<sup>162</sup>, 200 according to the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (IHFHR)<sup>163</sup>, more than 100 according to the USCIRF<sup>164</sup> and 144 according to the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights.<sup>165</sup>

This report will not assess in details acts committed during this period, as those are already well documented given the particular attention paid at the time by international and national watchdog organizations. Instead, some more detailed information will be given concerning Basil Mkalavishvili, his methods and his arrest, as those details are more rarely found.

#### **4.1.1 Basil Mkalavishvili and Religious Violence during 1999-2003**

Basil Mkalavishvili was defrocked from the GOC on 31 July 1995, during the Patriarchate Synod of the Georgian Orthodox Church. Mkalavishvili and his congregation were under the jurisdiction of the Metropolitan Kiprian group, which has been excommunicated from the Greek Orthodox Church.

This group preaches total isolation, denies the Ecumenical movement and refuses to conduct dialogue with different religions. Supporters of Mkalavishvili were known for their political activism. They often held public rallies and demonstrations, frequently conducted religious rituals in public and periodically destroyed "heretic" literature.

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<sup>160</sup> CIFDD 2000

<sup>161</sup> Jehovah's Witnesses

<sup>162</sup> Forum 18 – 2006.11.10

<sup>163</sup> IHFHR 2006

<sup>164</sup> USCIRF 2006

<sup>165</sup> UNCHR 2003

Mkalavishvili propagandized his ideas and popularized his activities through the Internet as well. On his web-site<sup>166</sup> it is possible to obtain information on his activities and facts about destroying religious minorities. Photos chronicling his acts of violence are also available on the web site.

Criticism of Mkalavishvili's activities on the part of the international community triggered protest demonstrations by his followers. For example, on May 20, 2002 the congregation of Basil Mkalavishvili demonstrated in front of the U.S. Embassy and the Public Defender's Office. They protested against a letter sent by American Senators to the President of Georgia, expressing the American legislators' concern to the Georgian government's failure to punish Mkalavishvili.<sup>167</sup> Basil Mkalavishvili was especially aggressive towards the former U.S. Ambassador to Georgia, Richard Miles, who criticized the Georgian government and Basil Mkalavishvili for harassing Jehovah's Witnesses in the Kaspi and Gori regions. They accused Richard Miles of interfering in Georgia's internal affairs and blamed him for his actions against the Orthodox Church. Demonstrators demanded the expulsion of the U.S. Ambassador from the country.<sup>168</sup> The same attitude against the US Ambassador was shared by notorious MP Guram Sharadze, who is well-known for his extremely negative attitude towards religious minorities.<sup>169</sup>

In March 2001, the Prosecutor General's Office (PGO) called for merging eight different criminal cases brought against Basil Mkalavishvili. The investigation was completed in October 2001, but the opening of the trial (court hearing) has been postponed. Initially Basil Mkalavishvili and his favorite lieutenant, Petre Ivanidze, were charged with criminal offences for two violent acts against Jehovah's Witnesses in January-February 2001, for destroying the Public Defender's Office in Tbilisi in January 2001 when they burned the petition against religious violence, for blocking the office door of the "Rezonansi" paper on 25 September 2000 and for violent acts against Baptists in February 2002, when they burned Bibles.

Some members of the Georgian government openly supported the activities of Mkalavishvili, and several MPs have made public statements justifying his actions.<sup>170</sup> Political groups in support of Mkalavishvili were even organized.<sup>171</sup> In March 2002, Georgian MP Revaz Shavelidze reported that "there is nothing harmful in Mkalavishvili's activities, as far as he tries to protect Orthodoxy from those people who are against it."<sup>172</sup>

Those political forces and politicians supporting Mkalavishvili commended him for actively fighting against Jehovah's Witnesses and the various sects in Georgia that represented a threat to the Orthodox Church. The same attitude was shared by the greater part of the Georgian government. Their failure to pay sufficient attention to this issue in a timely manner gave a tacit approval of the religious violence.

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<sup>166</sup> Basil Mkalavishvili Website

<sup>167</sup> Morning Newspaper 2002.05.21

<sup>168</sup> Rezonansi 2002.05.21; New Generation 2002.08.20

<sup>169</sup> 24 Saati 2002.08.20

<sup>170</sup> New Generation 2002.08.22

<sup>171</sup> New Generation 2002.10.01

<sup>172</sup> RFE/RL 2002.07.18

In 2003, before the Rose Revolution, opposition MP Vasil Maghlaperidze openly accused the government of supporting the religious violence. According to him it was obvious that “Basil is committing crimes and he is not punished because of being under the protection of State Chancellery [the office of President Shevardnadze].”<sup>173</sup>

Mkalavishvili’s rivals often accused him of having links to some figures in the government,<sup>174</sup> and Mkalavishvili himself did not deny this charge. In some instances, Mkalavishvili’s supporters knew in advance where the meeting of religious minorities would be held, and police forces aided Mkalavishvili and his group in disrupting religious minorities.

Religious violence was also propagandized among political groups. Guram Sharadze, MP from 1999 to 2003, was well-known for his activities against religious minorities, particularly Jehovah’s Witnesses. On 19 April 2002, the community of Guram Sharadze’s supporters was registered as the national movement “Our Georgia.” One of the main objectives of the movement is the protection of Orthodoxy by means of violence against religious minorities.<sup>175</sup> After its conception, a session of “Our Georgia” was held in the Sports Palace in Tbilisi with the slogan “We protect Orthodoxy from Jehovah’s Witnesses.”<sup>176</sup> Demonstrations of support toward the movement were also held in different regions of Georgia.<sup>177</sup> In the lead-up to the Rose Revolution, Guram Sharadze toured around the country to call for the fight against religious minorities.<sup>178</sup>

On 4 June 2003, the Vake-Saburtalo district court ordered preventative measures against him and issued a search warrant. On 11 March 2004, Mkalavishvili appeared at the Public Defender’s Office, where he held a press conference.<sup>179</sup>

On 12 March 2004, Basil Mkvavishvili was arrested in the early morning at a church located in Gldani.<sup>180</sup> During the special operation, tear-gas was used and the fence around the church was knocked down using special vehicles. As a result law-enforcement forces and the parish of the church came into conflict.<sup>181</sup> The action undertaken by the law-enforcement officers drew a mixed reaction in society. Despite the negative attitude towards Mkalavishvili, some condemned the circumstances surrounding his detention,<sup>182</sup> while some others supported the action.<sup>183</sup>

## 4.2 Reports on Religious Violence and Abuses Today

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<sup>173</sup> Alia 2002.05.2-3

<sup>174</sup> New Generation 2002.04.03

<sup>175</sup> Rezonansi 2002.04.30

<sup>176</sup> New Generation 2002.06.20

<sup>177</sup> 24 Saati 2002.07.16

<sup>178</sup> Morning Newspaper 2002.10.19; Morning Newspaper 2002.08.12

<sup>179</sup> 24 Saati 2004.03.12

<sup>180</sup> 24 Saati 2004.03.13

<sup>181</sup> Rezonansi 2004.03.13

<sup>182</sup> Rezonansi 2004.03.15

<sup>183</sup> Rezonansi 2004.03.13; 24 Saati 2004.03.13

It is now widely acknowledged, by international and local reports as well as by religious minorities themselves, that the period of violence that characterized the period 1999-2003 has ended with the prosecution by the authorities of the main instigators of these attacks.<sup>184</sup> This does not mean, however, that those acts have completely disappeared. Some abuses of religious freedom continue to occur.<sup>185</sup>

We saw that two main groups led the acts of religious violence in the past – Basil Mkalavishvili, his followers and Paata Bluashvili and his organization Jvari, the first being in jail and the second wanted by the authorities. It is interesting to note that today, two other groups were quoted as being active in recent cases of harassment: the Society of Saint David the Builder and the Union of Orthodox Parents.<sup>186</sup> Local priests belonging to the Georgian Orthodox Church allegedly lead the groups.<sup>187</sup> The Georgian Orthodox Church claims that such presence and the involvement of those groups often lack evidence.<sup>188</sup>

The Public Defender, in its reports issued every six months, reports abuses concerning complaints which had been brought to his office. The reports for the first and last six months of 2005 and for the first six months of 2006 are not available in English. The following excerpt was translated into English in a bid to give an overview of the nature and frequency of abuses reported to the Public Defender's Office:<sup>189</sup>

**“07.04.2005:** One member of the Jehovah’s Witnesses received repeated threats from his neighbors, who occasionally would throw stones at his house. He went to the Public Defender’s Office (PDO). The PDO wrote to the relevant police department but there was no reaction from their part. The Public Defender then went personally to talk to them and assured them that something would be done. Later, the Public Defender received a reply from the police which he described as “absurd” and “cynical,” that concluded that the neighbors have not been abused by Jehovah Witnesses.

**2005.04.18:** The directors of Tbilisi Sport Palace refused to rent the building to the organization “Sagurchagokoshki” (which forms part of the Jehovah’s Witnesses), giving the following explanation: “When a lot of people gather in the Sport’s Palace it always ends with some incidents” The Public Defender, informed of the fact, talked to the director who said that he was ready to rent the building to them until he “received a phone call.” He did not give further details [about the phone call].

**2005.04.15:** Two Jehovah Witnesses in Tbilisi entered into discussion with a man about religious issues after which the latter abused them verbally and physically. They called the Patrol Police, which came very quickly but instead of clarifying the situation and

<sup>184</sup> Forum 18 – 2006.11.10; IHFHR 2006; USSD 2006; USCIRF 2006; USSD 2005; HRW 2006; FH – NIT 2006; Freedom House – FW 2006; AI 2005; HRIDC 2005; Forum 18 – 2005.11.25; USSD 2004; UNCHR 2005; Public Defender 2005- 1; Public Defender 2005 – 2; Public Defender 2006 - 1

<sup>185</sup> Ibid

<sup>186</sup> Baptist Church, ICCN 2006, Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah’s Witnesses

<sup>187</sup> Ibid

<sup>188</sup> Georgian Orthodox Church

<sup>189</sup> Public Defender 2005- 1; Public Defender 2005 – 2; Public Defender 2006 - 1

arresting the man started to abuse verbally the two Jehovah Witnesses. Encouraged by this behavior the man again beat up the two people. After the incident the PDO wrote to the head of the Patrol Police. After 15 days without a reply they called the police department, and were told that the reply letter had been ready for some time already and they can come and take it. In the letter it was stated that such an incident had never been registered so there was nothing they could do.

**2005.04.18:** The head of the Russian Pentecostals Nikolai Kalutski was planning to perform a religious service in the basement of his house [as he claims, it was impossible for him to rent any place] for the occasion of the “Good Friday” celebration. His neighbors decided to prevent him from doing it. The local population and approximately 50-60 “fanatics” led by a priest blocked the way to the house for almost four hours, preventing members of the congregation from entering. The latter were insulted and received some threats, including death threats. The police and representatives of the PDO came to prevent any physical abuse. The PDO tried to negotiate with the protesters to clear the way without success. He asked the Head of the Tbilisi Police Department, who was present, for his assistance in helping the people exercise their constitutional rights and perform their religious service. However instead of asking the protesters to leave, the police chief asked Nikolai Kalutski to postpone the religious service. Finally, the police and PDO convinced protesters to free the way. The police did not launch any proceedings concerning the case.

**2005.05.03:** One member of the Jehovah’s Witnesses who had to do his military service asked to perform an alternative civil service, as allowed by the legislation. However, allegedly having been deceived by the military service commission, he was sent to military service. After the Public Defender met with the head of the military service commission, the head of the alternative service commission, the head of the village where this citizen resides and other regional and local representatives, this person was eventually transferred to alternative service.

**2005.05.05** Leaders of the Pentecostal Church World of Life, which meets in a private home in Orsantia village in the Zugdidi district, were summoned by the head of the village administration. The latter demanded to see their identity documents and proof of their right to hold services (no such official document exists or is required by law). He banned services until they could produce the documents and threatened to call in the police and representatives of the GOC. When he stepped down from his position for health reasons, the services resumed.

**2005.05.29:** In Gldani, two followers of the Jehovah’s Witnesses were verbally and physically abused and robbed by some people. Apart from personal belongings, they took their religious literature, which were later burnt. The two victims called the Patrol Police, which recorded the incident but did not initiate further actions. The Public Defender sent a letter to the Patrol Police Department after which the police officers, the victims and their lawyers met with the representatives of the PDO. The police officers refused to make any statement without prior discussion with their supervisors. A statement was

received later in which they denied the facts of abuse and that the burning of literature had happened.

**2005.06.05:** The PDO was contacted by a Protestant priest and head of the international Christian charitable and humanitarian organization Survival. The latter had started to show, using a portable projector, a film of Jesus in different locations around Mukhiani. Although people were satisfied, one woman expressed dissatisfaction and called the Patrol Police, who came and without explanation asked the organization to stop showing the film, saying otherwise they would call journalists. The members of the organization told them that they can call journalists if they wanted to, after which the police officers asked for more police officers to come. The latter pressured the organization and threatened them with fines, after which they stopped showing the film.

**2005.06.06:** One woman complained to the PDO that she and her female friend, who are both Jehovah's Witnesses, talked to a person in the street who happened to be an ex-police officer. They agreed to meet at a later date. On the day of the meeting, this person asked the Jehovah's Witnesses to enter a house, after which he physically abused them and burnt their literature in the garden, facts which were witnessed by the police officer's wife and three other persons. The two women managed to run away and went to the nearest police stations. There they were laughed at by police officers who refused to record their statement, claiming that their chief was absent.

**2005.06.25:** One woman contacted the PDO stating that she and her female friend, both Jehovah's Witnesses, had a meeting in Vaketili, Tbilisi. On the seventh floor of the building they met a neighbor who physically and verbally abused them.

**2005.06.29:** Four Jehovah Witnesses from Kutaisi brought a complaint to the PDO, claiming that after they had bought a house in Kutaisi and during its renovation 50-60 people gathered in front of it and threatened to kill them and burn down the house. The Jehovah's Witnesses called the Patrol Police, but when the latter arrived they stood without reacting and let the situation unfold for two more hours. After that, the police, instead of dealing with the crowd, took two of the Jehovah's Witnesses to a police station, took their IDs and driving licenses and insulted one of them. Meanwhile, the crowd entered the house and abused the two remaining people still inside. Then, almost every day, such a crowd would gather in front of the house, threatening the owners and throwing stones at the house. The most active member of the group was a local Orthodox priest. In order to clarify the situation, representatives of the PDO went to Kutaisi, which provoked more anger from the side of the group. The night that the Public Defender's representatives were there several people threw bricks at the house. The renovation had, of course, stopped, not only because of the abuses but also because Kutaisi Architectural Inspection had requested certificates for such work. Kutaisi local media presented the events in a non-objective manner which indirectly encouraged aggressions. No one was arrested. On October 20, the Kutaisi Police Department requested two of the Jehovah's Witnesses to write a statement, while telling them what to write. They refused and were verbally abused. The PDO's efforts brought some results and two police officers were

arrested in January 2006. Those persons publicly apologized to the victims and in April 2006 they decided to drop the charge against them.

**2005.07.11:** The leader of the Evangelist-Baptist Church of the village Rodasheni bought a house in 2003, which they renovated in order to transform it into a church. The former owner of the house in June 2006 forcefully took the keys from the new owners, causing the renovation work to stop. The key was given to the head of the village, who refused to return it to the owner. The PDO has written to the General Prosecutor's Office and an investigation has started.

**2005.08.28:** A religious meeting that was held in a house owned by Jehovah's Witnesses was interrupted by around 30 people who gathered in front of it. These persons shouted and threatened the people inside, calling for an end to the meeting. They tried to break the door when the owner opened it. They forced all people to leave. On August 30, 2005, the owner went to the local police asking them to take appropriate measures so that a meeting could be held on 1 September. On this date, the same group of people blocked the way to her house. The police were informed and asked the Jehovah's Witnesses to leave. The same incident happened on September 18 and again the police did not help. On the PDO's recommendation, an investigation was launched.

**2005.09.14:** The leader of the Georgian Evangelist Church wanted to register his religious congregation as allowed by the law a few months earlier. However, the notary refused to notarize the statutes. Other notaries similarly refused. To avoid any misunderstanding, the document was reviewed by the representatives of the registration department in the Ministry of Justice, who did not notice any irregularity. However they received refusals from several notaries who claimed that they were not aware of the relevant law. One of the notaries specifically said that she refused to notarize because she is Georgian Orthodox and does not recognize any other Church. The Public Defender went to meet her and she agreed to prepare the documents in ten days. After the ten days she refused again for the same reason. On PDO recommendations, the notary was suspended for a year by the Ministry of Justice.

**2005.11.03: 2006** In November 2005 Jehovah's Witnesses rented a hall in Rustavi to conduct meetings. On 3 November 2005, Paata Bluashvili, the leader of the Orthodox group Jvari, and members of the group threatened the owner of the meeting hall, who then cancelled the contract with the Jehovah's Witnesses. Bluashvili was convicted in 2004 of interfering with a religious service and given a two-year suspended sentence. Pending investigation of the November incident, Bluashvili was sentenced to pretrial detention. Upon Bluashvili's appeal of the three-month detention, a court of appeals overturned the sentence and released him, pending trial. In April 2006 a Rustavi court reinstated the three-month sentence. Bluashvili failed to appear at the April hearing. He is wanted by the authorities.

**2005.11.24-26:** On the initiative of the Christian Research Center, which depends on the Patriarchate, the international symposium "Christianity in our lives: Past, present and future" was held. Several foreign and local non-Orthodox guests were invited. The

symposium aimed at demonstrating the wish of the Georgian Orthodox Church to promote tolerance and inter-faith dialogue. During the meeting, a group of young Orthodox started insulting representatives of the Apostolic Armenian Church, Catholic Church and guests from other countries, some of which were Orthodox. [...] The Lutheran-Evangelist Church bishop Andrea Shtokel was especially abused. During his speech the group of young people has called him "The monkey of Luther." In one of the interviews, the Orthodox priest Andrea Ueidi (the leader of the Orthodox Church in Turin) described about the symposium: "Some part of the people who attended the symposium, mostly young people, were there apparently not to listen to the speeches but for a completely different purpose. When I finished with my speech, I was confronted with so-called Test-questions which had nothing to do with what I said. The aim of these test-questions was to question the level of my knowledge on Orthodoxy. The general attitude towards the non-Orthodox participants was very intolerant, which, given the hospitality of Georgians, was very strange to me."

**2005.12:** In the village of Tsinubani in the predominantly ethnic Armenian region of Samtskhe-Javakheti, a local priest of Apostolic Armenian Church denounced a local Pentecostal congregation and urged villagers to prevent the latter from burying its members in the local cemetery. The Public Defender called for an investigation which is still pending.

**2006.02:** The Jehovah's Witnesses asked permission to rent the Tbilisi Sport's Palace for their meeting. On 22 February 2006, the administration of the Sport's Palace declared that they can rent it if security is guaranteed from the State and the meeting was cancelled. They had already received the same answer in 2005. An investigation is underway.

**2006.02:** One person verbally abused two Jehovah's Witnesses followers. During the court hearing he apologized and the Jehovah's Witnesses dropped the charges.

The Public Defender report for the last six months of 2006 has not been issued at the time of this writing. However, at least three further cases have occurred since:

**"2006.09.18** The Assyrian Catholics in Georgia were building a cultural centre that combines classrooms and meeting rooms with a sanctuary for worship, when it was raided by a mob of about 60 people. Three or four days after leaflets started to circulate in the district, stirring people up against the Catholics and urging them to come to the centre. Fr. Benny Yadgar, head of the Assyrian Catholics, says that "The letter alleged that Catholics are aggressive proselytizers who killed our monks in the 14th and 15th centuries. It also alleged they marry cats and dogs and give the Eucharist to animals." Fr Yadgar was away at the time of the mob attack, but Giuni Gulua was one of two community members who tried to explain to television journalists and to the mob why the community was building the centre. "Part of the mob obviously had no clue as to why they were there, but the other part was very aggressively hostile, saying we had no right

to build a catholic church [...] We explained that we had all the legal documents we needed to build the church, but many of them weren't prepared to listen to us. We then left to avoid any possibility of violent confrontation." Some of the mob then went down to the cellar and damaged the interior walls. Although all the external work is now complete, Fr Yadgar said completing the interior could take another year, especially in the wake of the damage and any potential attack. Despite the fact that the attack was widely reported in the media and was the subject of a debate on Rustavi-2 television, Zurab Tskhovebadze, spokesperson for the Orthodox Patriarchate, told Forum 18 on October 19 he had never heard anything about any problems over the Assyrian Catholic centre in question. "If it was true, of course it would be unacceptable for us Orthodox to use force, whether for political or religious ends."<sup>190</sup>

**2006.11** After Jehovah's Witnesses finished the construction of a Kingdom Hall outside Tbilisi, five persons attacked two of the watchmen at night. One of the guards locked the door and called the police. The second was severely beaten. The Deputy Public Defender was called, who in turn called the Ministry of the Interior. His first deputy quickly came. Four persons were detained and placed into custody for two months.<sup>191</sup>

**2006.11.26** A presentation of a book was held in the library of the Parliament in Tbilisi dedicated to the history of one church. The book claims that although it now belongs to the Georgian Orthodox Church, it used to belong to the Catholic Church. Two groups of people, the Society of Saint David the Builder and the Union of Orthodox Parents, interrupted the presentation, seized the microphones, and verbally abused the Catholic priests and the authors of the book. Police stopped them from further abusing people but did not arrest them.<sup>192</sup>

### Comments by Religious Minorities on Abuses and Violence

#### *Baptist Church*

"Between 1999 and 2003 some atrocities have been committed. Our main Church has been attacked three times by fundamentalists. Once we barely avoided bloodshed. We received support from the British Embassy, which was important to us. The diplomatic corps is not aware of what is going on. If local diplomats would raise this issue it could be useful. [...] we have been in Georgia for 150 years and the reasons we suffered most is that unlike most of other religious groups, ethnically and culturally we are Georgian. This provokes a lot of hatred. Now violence is coming back. The people who led them belong to two groups – the Society of David Aghmashenebeli (Saint Davit the Builder), and the Union of Orthodox Parents. They have never been made responsible for minor crimes committed. It is the same way as Basil Mkalavishvili started violence around 1999. The climate of impunity encourages religious intolerance in the country. The difference this time is that Basil Mkalavishvili has been defrocked so no one could link him to the GOC. However you can find Orthodox priests in these two groups. The GOC stays silent.

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<sup>190</sup> FORUM 18 – 19.10.2006

<sup>191</sup> Jehovah's Witnesses

<sup>192</sup> ICCN 2006, Baptist Church

Jehovah's Witnesses have suffered the most. We come after them. And then there are Pentecostals and Lutherans. [...] Churches and religious groups are reluctant to raise their voices over abuses. For example, for the Roman Catholic Church, 90 percent of the abuses have never been made public. This is because they do not want to harm their relationship with the GOC. The Muslims also say that everything is ok. They don't want to upset the GOC. It is the same with Jews. [...] Armenians have always been silent, but for the last two years they have started to speak out. It's because of their new leadership who want to push the issue of return of property [...] Also in the countryside many abuses happen, but most remain unreported.”

#### *Jehovah's Witnesses*

“There are many positive things. It is obvious that there are no attacks going on anymore. There were some facts and the responsible persons were detained and punished. We can hold peaceful services in private houses. It is very different with the previous years. However, there is a “but.” There are organized attacks and if something happens, the police act correctly. Two weeks ago we had such incidents. We finished the construction of a Kingdom Hall outside Tbilisi, and five persons attacked two of watchmen at night. One of the guards locked the door and called the police. The second was severely beaten. The Deputy Public Defender was called, who in turn called the Ministry of the Interior. His first deputy quickly came. Four persons were detained and placed into custody for two months. So this is positive. [...] Some individual cases still happen. Recently two women were beaten by a man. He was detained and put into jail. So the reaction from the part of the authorities is good. In three years we have had 20 physical attacks, while during those [past] years we have had 800. During visits to houses if people do not want to listen they apologize and close the door. We have 16 000 followers in Georgia and every months we distribute 1 000 magazines. So people like our leaflets.”

#### *Lutheran Church*

“We do not have big problems with regard to religious violence. I am new here and I have heard my colleagues say that there used to be some problems in the past. We provide meals and food to two hundred people on a daily basis - maybe that is why. People see we do social work which can explain why there are no abuses against us.”

#### *Seventh-day Adventists*

“There was a lot of violence during 1999-2003. I remember one act against us in Kutaisi. A lot of people were outside our building. We managed to evacuate women and children. No one was beaten up, strangely enough, but for two or three years we could not use the place. We came back there one year ago. It is not ideal but much better. The situation has improved in this regard. Now I find that most abuses are related to the family. And it can be physical. It especially comes to wives who have chosen our faith, unlike the rest of the family. It is regular that in such cases the rest of the family simply cut all links with them, or if they do not they persist in wanting to reconvert them. The same thing happens with friends. And in the regions the situation is more tensed...”

### *Russian Pentecostals*

“Violence now has stopped.”

### **4.3 Religious Violence and Schools**

The USSD IRF 2005 recorded:

“During the period covered by this report, students complained that teachers began most courses, including mathematics and science, by leading the class in a recitation of Orthodox prayers. Those who did not participate, including Muslim students, were sometimes punished. In many classrooms, teachers hung orthodox icons or pictures of Georgian Orthodox religious figures. Some schools reportedly have Orthodox chapels where students are encouraged to pray.”<sup>193</sup>

The Human Rights Watch’s Report 2005 concurs that: “Many schools have Georgian Orthodox symbols and prayer rooms, and children are said to be pressured to participate in prayer.”<sup>194</sup>

In its report for the first six months of 2005 the Public Defender commented on the context of the new Law on Education:

“This means that during their education process the representatives of any religious entity or teachers do not have the right to popularize any of the religions or involve students in any religious rituals, as happened before and sometimes happens even now.”<sup>195</sup>

In its report for the first six months of 2006, he stated that “the chaotic situation during religious education in public schools” and “discrimination from the side of teachers” persists.<sup>196</sup>

### **Comments by Religious Minorities on Abuses at Schools**

In the context of the negative attitude toward religious minorities coupled with significant improvement in aspects of religious violence, the question was asked to representatives of religious groups as to whether they noticed that the children from their congregation were victims of abuses at school.

#### *Catholics*

“[talking about abuses in general] I noticed some problems; mainly at school; children being ostracized because they are Catholics. This never happened before. [...] However,

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<sup>193</sup> USCIRF 2005

<sup>194</sup> HRW 2005

<sup>195</sup> Public Defender 2005- 1

<sup>196</sup> Public Defender 2006 - 1

this happens mostly in the regions. In cities, where more intelligentsia reside, Catholics, Catholic churches and traditions are traditionally always been respected”

#### *Armenian Church*

“Only 1000 ethnic Armenians pupils go to Armenian schools. The big majority go to Russian schools. But even those who go to Georgian schools don’t feel discrimination. The practice to start classes with prayers has stopped. And the course on religion is not a big problem - there are more serious problems.”

#### *Baptist Church*

“At school pupils hide their faiths as they fear if it is known they could be insulted and humiliated by fellow classmates and even teachers in some cases. The teachers of religions hold the idea that they have to indoctrinate people. You have many religious references even during other classes. Children attend classes of religion - if not it would mean disclosure of their adherence to another religion”.

#### *Jehovah Witnesses*

“[Jehovah Witnesses] Children don’t hide their faiths at school. I have not heard of humiliation [of our children]. Some of them attend classes on religion but do not participate in some parts. We are confident in the Ministry of Education which is working on this issue. Apart from that I would like to quote an incident linked with school that happened in Rustavi. We built a Kingdom Hall not far from a school. In this school teachers and students organized a meeting to launch an attack on the Kingdom Hall. We brought a complaint to the Ministry of Education.”

#### *Seventh-day Adventists*

“We had, and still have, some problems concerning discrimination at school. Now teachers are afraid [after the arrests of some instigators of religious violence] so they don’t speak openly against religious minorities as before. But it still happens. My daughter goes to kindergarten. Her teacher is a very Orthodox person and the room is full of icons and candles. She teaches children to do the cross sign and recite prayers. Once my daughter came home and asked me why we go to Satan’s Church. I went to the school explaining that such comments were illegal and the situation is now solved. Other problems concern exams on Saturdays. Saturday is our “Holy Day.” But examinations are not always moved to another day. If they are not, children miss them and get a 2 [failing grade]”.

#### *Russian Pentecostals*

“Our children go to Russian schools. Abuse is not an issue there. Between kids, maybe some feel humiliation from others and don’t dare to defend themselves to avoid problems [...] but there is a kind of inequality concerning schools. I remember when an Orthodox

church was built on the premises of a school that the director gave the GOC. I cannot imagine what would happen if we would build something so close to a school. No one would let ‘the sects’ do so.”

## **5. RELIGIOUS MINORITIES AND PROTECTION**

It was generally acknowledged by sources interviewed as well as local reports that the level of protection granted to victims of religious abuses in Georgia improved after the new authorities came to power.<sup>197</sup>

### **5.1 Police Misconduct**

It was noted that the Ministry of Internal Affairs became more active in protecting victims of religious abuses. However, local police sometimes failed to provide appropriate protection.<sup>198</sup>

In its report for the first six months of 2005, the Public Defender stressed the inappropriate behavior of law enforcement authorities when dealing with cases of religious abuses:

“The facts described in [the complaints sent to the PDO] and the reactions of law enforcement units allow us to make the following conclusions.

- a) The acts of discrimination and violence toward religious minorities by local self-government bodies as well as private persons are in most cases followed by an irresponsible and cynical reaction from law enforcement authorities. They do not take appropriate measures and they themselves are sometimes involved in those acts.
- b) Since no measures are taken by the police, it creates a good basis for the continuation of the violations. The police officers concerned were not punished, in spite of the Public Defender’s recommendation, as of yet.”<sup>199</sup>

In the two following reports<sup>200</sup> however, “the adequate reactions of the law enforcement authorities on the fact of religious discrimination” was given as a reason for the improvement of the situation with regard to religious freedom. It was also noticed, nevertheless, that the investigations launched were usually closed due to lack of evidence.<sup>201</sup>

The USSD report for 2006 noted:

“Local officials and police sometimes denied [...] protection to religious minorities. On some occasions during the reporting period, local police were slow to prevent the harassment of non-Orthodox religious groups, including Jehovah’s Witnesses and Pentecostals. Although police rarely facilitated harassment of religious minority groups, they sometimes failed to protect them.”<sup>202</sup>

<sup>197</sup> ICCN 2006; USSD 2006; IHFHR 2006; USCIRF 2006; USSD 2005; UK Home Office – 2005; FH – NIT 2006; Public Defender 2005 - 2

<sup>198</sup> Public Defender 2005 – 1; USSD 2005; UK Home Office - 2005

<sup>199</sup> Public Defender 2005 - 1

<sup>200</sup> Public Defender 2005 – 2; Public Defender 2006 - 1

<sup>201</sup> Ibid

<sup>202</sup> USSD 2006

For Malkhaz Songulashvili from the Evangelical-Baptist Church:

“When we had problems, the police were always ironic about us. I think it has to do with the lack of training and education. They do not have a clear understanding of what it is to represent the authorities. They do not understand that one can have personal convictions, but that does not mean that you should not protect others’, particularly when you are supposed to defend order.”<sup>203</sup>

However, Nikolai Kalutski for the Russian Pentecostals said that [the police] “try to help now:”

“Before Saakashvili’s government it was not so. When people attacked my house, my wife called the police and all they did was to tell her, “enough with you.” Now this behavior has changed.”<sup>204</sup>

In 2005, in an operational guidance note on asylum claims based on religious grounds, the United Kingdom Home Office, on the basis of international reports, concluded with regard to Georgian law enforcement authorities:

“Public confidence in the police continued to increase during 2005 due to a reduction in corruption and a number of police officers were arrested or administratively disciplined in high-profile cases of physical abuse or deaths in custody. Although at times the police failed to adequately protect minority religious groups, in general the police and the authorities were generally more responsive to the needs of these groups in 2005 than compared to previous years.”<sup>205</sup>

## 5.2 Prosecution of Instigators of Religious Abuses

Improvement was also noted from the part of the Prosecutor General’s Office concerning investigations into recent cases of abuses. The Human Rights Unit in the Legal Department of the PGO is charged with protecting human rights, including religious freedom, and some of their activity reports are available online in English.<sup>206</sup> However it should be noted that many cases come to a standstill due to lack of evidence.

While Basil Mkalavishvili and a dozen others were tried and convicted, many of the authors of those cases of attacks against religious minorities that happened between 1999 and 2003 were not prosecuted;<sup>207</sup> a fact that has caused resentment among religious minorities and made them fear that impunity might lead to further violence. This situation makes Malkhaz Songulashvili from the Evangelical-Baptists Church believe that “there is no protection from the State.”<sup>208</sup> Some Jehovah's Witnesses have been seeking justice

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<sup>203</sup> Baptist Church

<sup>204</sup> Russian Pentecostals

<sup>205</sup> UK Home Office - 2005

<sup>206</sup> <http://www.pog.gov.ge>

<sup>207</sup> See in particular Forum 18 – 2006.11.10

<sup>208</sup> Baptist Church

through the European Court of Human Rights. Four cases are pending there, including an application in 2001 by 97 victims.<sup>209</sup>

### **5.3 Public Defender of Georgia**

The Office of the Public Defender (ombudsman) of Georgia was established by law in 1996. According to its mandate the Public Defender can investigate, without any interference complaints filed to his office by individuals. However, while he can record the infringed right and make relevant recommendations to the authorities, he does not have the power to enforce them. The Public Defender's Office issues every six months a report on the situation of human rights in Georgia which gives an account of the infringements recorded and follow-up to the recommendations having been made.

The Public Defender's Office was found to be a trusted resource for religious minorities with regard to the abuses committed against them. In particular, the PDO is seen as an active intermediary between them and high officials, specifically in cases of people gathering against religious events when the police do not disperse them from their own initiative.<sup>210</sup>

#### **Comments by Religious Minorities on Protection**

##### *Baptist Church*

“There is no protection and nothing has been done to prosecute the perpetrators [of the acts of religious violence in the past]. [...] There is something that works: Images. For example, when Shevardnadze came to a Baptist church to apologize for acts of violence it acted as a signal to local authorities that we had to be protected and it worked for some time. The new government has never done something like that, has never gone to a Catholic or Baptist church. To a synagogue or a mosque, yes. This is because of the tribal mentality. They go to those places because it is a closed society, the followers are generally Georgian-speaking but not ethnically Georgian and they do not try to evangelize. So there is no danger from them. And besides, it is also advantageous for their interest: When you show that you respect Muslim or Jews by attending a celebration it looks good abroad. Society is clannish. Often people are fired on the grounds that they are not Orthodox, even from governmental offices. Or they are told to convert. You hear it but it is not reported. There is no culture of rule of law, no one believes in justice.”

##### *Jehovah’s Witnesses*

“Basil Mkalavishvili has been convicted. The leader of “Jvari” [Paata Bluashvili] is wanted. Therefore, their followers know that they would be punished if they harass us, and when they see us they go to the other side of the street. The whole issue lies in punishment. Concerning those older cases, some people have not been arrested yet. For

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<sup>209</sup> Forum 18 – 2006.11.10; USSD 2006

<sup>210</sup> Jehovah’s Witnesses; Seventh-day Adventists; Russian Pentecostals

the last three years there have been no court cases. This is very bad. Ten people were arrested while there were several dozens of people involved. We know that eight of the most active ones are still free. Criminal investigations were launched but yielded no result. The General Procurator's Office does nothing concerning those old cases. But in terms of reaction to abuses, the biggest role is played by the Public Defender's Office. They are mediators and it has some really positive effects, for example in Rustavi, or Telavi. [...] we can freely apply to them. He can call high-ranking officials, which is impossible for us to do, and he does some monitoring. We have no problem with the police. On the whole we can say that we feel protected. [...] But because of impunity for older cases, attacks can continue. Impunity encourages violence.”

*Muslim Community*

“We feel protected. This is a very good government.”

*Seventh-day Adventists*

“The Public Defender's Office helps a lot. Although the police are not fully responsive yet, the situation is better than it used to be. They give the impression that they do not really want to help. At any rate, if something would happen to us I would go to the Public Defender.”

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