Uncertain divides: religion, ethnicity, and politics in the Georgian borderlands

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Throughout the former Soviet Union, religion has gained important momentum in the decade following the abolishment of state-atheism and the demise of communism. But while the renewed importance and visibility of religion are often explained as a return to pre-Soviet religious practices, in Ajaria the religious dynamics radically contest this explanation. Whereas before the Soviet era Ajarians adhered to Islam, an accelerating process of conversion to Christianity was observable in the years following the Soviet collapse. This case study aims to understand this outcome by investigating the dynamics of religious identification on the frontier of the Muslim and Christian realms. It asks how Ajarians, who have come to see themselves (at least partly) as Georgians, presently redefine their religious identity. The basic question that I will address here is: Why was the Muslim renewal short-lived and why are Ajarians increasingly converting to Christianity? It tries to answer this question by analyzing the post-Soviet dynamics of religious change not as an exclusively religious confrontation between Islam and Christianity but as struggles within a post-Soviet environment in which local and national worldviews clash and are redefined in the process. To introduce the subject and to provide initial insights in the dimensions of the shifting religious frontier I will start with a description of an event to which I was invited by Bishop Dmitri of the Batumi-Skhalta diocese. As for the reader, this event was my personal introduction to the subject, as it coincided with the start of my fieldwork in Upper Ajaria.

The Georgian Republic held double festivities in spring 2000 to celebrate several notable moments in its history. According to a year-count that seems to be commonplace in post-soviet republics attempting to advance new national identities, it had been two millenniums since Christianity made its entrance into Georgia and 3000 years since the first Georgian State was established. The Autonomous Republic of Ajaria played a special role in these events, because of its peculiar history. Although the inhabitants of Ajaria are (or were) predominantly Muslim, the province is believed to be the site where Christianity made its first appearance in Georgia. The memorable year 2000 then was an excellent occasion for the Georgian Orthodox Church to raise awareness of Ajaria’s presumed deep Christian roots and, moreover, to reinforce its missionary work among the region’s Muslim population. One of the celebrations organized was a procession to the place where the first church in Georgia was supposed to have been built. According to the story, after traveling from Trabzon into Lazica in the first century AD, the apostle Andrew built a church in the

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1 The Georgian Times (August 23, 2000) wrote: “it is the 3000th anniversary of Georgian statehood, the 2000th anniversary of Christ’s birth, the 1700th anniversary of Georgia becoming a Christian state, and the 1500th anniversary of the Georgian church acquiring autonomy.”
heart of present-day Upper Ajaria. According to the clergy, the significance of the apostle’s activities was that he introduced the principle of Christian faith and thereby paved the way for later missionary activities, despite having brought about full Christianization. On May 23rd, a group of priests, bishops, scholars and locally revered writers made a pilgrimage to this most ancient site of Georgian Christianity.

The appearance of the group of Christians in the small Muslim village of Didachara was doubtlessly an unusual sight for the villagers. Black-bearded priests in equally black cassocks carried a colorful icon of Saint Andrew and were followed by a group of singing youths. They made their way through the village to the top of the hill where the church had supposedly once overlooked the village. It is hard to guess the thoughts of the village-men who sat on benches in front of the mosque watching the procession pass by. Whatever they were thinking, the men kept silent, either taken by surprise or more likely, being instructed by the village authorities not to make provocations.

At the top of the hill a small natural clearing partly surrounded by trees overlooked the village and the green valleys running down to the Black Sea. Indeed the place formed a remarkably convenient spot for the supposed existence of a church and although there was not a single sign of any religious building, the participants easily imagined that this had been the original site. Any reason to doubt the existence of the church, moreover, was symbolically erased by the placement of a commemorative plaque, which stressed the historical significance of the place. The participants gathered around the icon; on one side stood the clergy and on the other side the representatives of Batumi University. Some local youth formed a second row, while a handful of representatives from the local government watched the spectacle from a short distance. Bishop Dmitri opened a case, took out the religious requisites and when everything was prepared began the service. The priests and children sang church songs that floated away in the air. The bishop led the prayer and various rituals. An hour passed before the ceremony was completed. The bishop then walked to the icon and with a brush he sprinkled holy water over the picture of St Andrew and invited the attendants to receive God’s blessings.

After the completion of the religious ceremony the attendants left in procession, headed by the icon of Saint Andrew. Their departure represented the continuation of the Saint’s travels through Georgia. The celebrations concluded with a supra

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2 This version is based on the work of Mroveli - an 8th century Georgian bishop. Although the passages referring to St. Andrew’s travels are considered insets in Mroveli’s work, they are increasingly accepted as proofs of the ancient roots of Christianity in the region. See for example Bibileishvili and Mgeladze (2000) and the website of the Batumi and Skhala eparchy at http://eparchy.batumi.net/.

3 The renewed attention to St Andrew forms a break with earlier Georgian historiography, which traced Christianization to the missionary work of Holy Nino in the 4th century AD (Thomson 1996).

4 Not everyone took this story for granted. A young man from Khulo told me that he didn’t believe the story because the sources mentioned not Didachara but Didi Achara [didi means large], which back then was a name for the entire region. But the one time he had expressed his doubts at Batumi University he was reproached.
(festive dinner) presented by the mayor in honor of the guests. As is custom when respected guests arrive from Batumi or other Georgian cities, the banquet was in 'true Georgian style,' with plenty of food, wine and vodka. The bishop was appointed as tamad a (head of the table) for the occasion. Being an excellent speaker, he managed to perfectly evoke the region's ancient history and its connection with Christianity. In subsequent speeches, the priests, scholars and writers gave their views on the biography of Saint Andrew and the 'unfortunate' history of Ajaria. They especially stressed the tragic result of three centuries of Turkish oppression, namely that so many inhabitants abandoned Christianity. But almost simultaneously, this tragedy was trivialized by stories that purportedly proved Christianity's enduring influence in the region. The account that women went at night to the church in Skhalta until 1929 intimated long lasting Christian devotion. Similarly, discussion on the local village-practice of making two perpendicular cuts in homemade cornbread — a 'Christian' symbol — revealed Christianity's enduring influence. In the same spirit and in line with the remarks of the previous speakers the bishop predicted a bright future in which the local inhabitants would return to their original and native religion.

The asymmetries of power between the intellectual elite and the clergy on the one hand, and the (at least nominally) Muslim villagers on the other, seemed clear in this encounter, but it was certainly not unchallenged. When a toast was raised to the inseparable connection between the Georgian nation and church, one of the attending villagers loudly remarked: “Well, I myself am Georgian, but I am also Muslim, what about that?” The comment caused stirring in the room. Several villagers dared to laugh heartily. But for the clergy and the guests from Batumi it was an unpleasant moment, though they too tried their best to keep favorable facial expressions.

Not long after this minor incident the bishops and priests retreated. Only some scholars who were from the region and the villagers remained. The departure of the clergy brought about an abrupt change of atmosphere. No longer was ancient history discussed, but instead, those who remained talked about the reasons for the one-sided focus on Christian roots. As one villager expressed with some cynicism: “It is really nice that Christianity has such a long history in Ajaria, but now it is us who live here, and we have our own life, our own religion.” In other words, whereas the clergy aimed to include Ajarians and Georgians in the same category by stressing the Christian roots of the region, the villagers (although identifying with the Georgian nation) did not accept the full implication of this inclusion and differentiated between 'us Muslims' and 'them Christians.' Thus, though the church stressed the 'long Christian history' and underlined that the villagers' ancestors were Christians, the villagers themselves stressed the present-day realities of life and agreed on the importance of history only insofar as it involved their immediate forefathers, which by implication meant an Islamic tradition.
The events revealed something of the social context within which the Georgian Orthodox Church was expanding its influence among villagers whose ancestors adopted Islam several centuries ago. The clergy, backed by the intelligentsia and (with some reservations) the village administration, was able to demonstrate its rhetorical power concerning the past and future of Ajaria. As such, the events were typical of the frontier, taking that ‘frontier’ refers to “the territorial expansion of nations or civilizations into ‘empty’ areas” (Baud and Van Schendel 1997: 213). But as the use of diacritics already suggests, the frontier never is really empty. Although the clergy was in a strong position to display its view on the relation between Christianity and the Georgian nation, this display was without much immediate impact on the local community. Despite an undeniable advance of the Georgian church in Upper Ajaria, the outcome of the resulting confrontation between Islam and Christianity is immersed with irregularities. The concept ‘frontier’ is useful as it draws attention to these contradictions without neglecting asymmetrical power relations. Let me present two quotations from scholars who were concerned with understanding the general nature of ‘the frontier.’

[T]he frontier was not the end (“tail”) but rather the beginning (“forehead”) of the state; it was the spearhead of light and knowledge expanding into the realms of darkness and the unknown. [The frontier was characterized by] pioneer settlements of a forward-moving culture bent on occupying the whole area (Kristof 1959: 270)

[T]he linear frontier as it is conventionally indicated on a map always proves, when studied on the ground, to be a zone rather than a line […] It is not surprising that the ambivalent loyalties of frontier people are always conspicuous and historically important (Lattimore 1955: 106-7)

These two definitions serve as sensitizing concepts to the dimensions that are important in understanding processes of change at the frontier. They remind us that nothing is hard and fast on the frontier. Instead of being a line or divide, the frontier is a zone with its own dynamics and in which inhabitants display ambivalent loyalties. At the same time, the authors suggest that these ambivalences are not devoid of direction. Kristof writes that the frontier “was the spearhead of light and knowledge expanding into the realms of darkness and the unknown.” This is a political statement which reflects how dominant groups perceive the frontier.5 As such the quotation resembles how the clergy and intelligentsia perceive their activities in Upper Ajaria, and points to the power-differentials involved. But since the frontier is never ‘empty,’ this “forward-moving culture” both clashes and interweaves with the interests and cultural horizons of the local population.

5 See also Kopytoff who writes that “The definition of the frontier as ‘empty’ is political and made from the intruders’ perspective” (1987:25).
In Upper Ajaria this confrontation implied challenges to the ideal of the nation-state, which led to ambivalent as well as conspicuous and extreme views concerning the nature of the categories ‘ethnicity,’ ‘religion,’ and ‘nation.’ In the described event, the participants discussed whether Georgian-ness by nature implied being Christian and whether it is possible for Muslims to retain their faith and still claim Georgian nationality. Because the involved categories are imagined as deeply rooted in the past, this struggle is also (perhaps primarily) a struggle over history. Historical claims are critical tools for both parties, both in promoting Christianity, and in defending Islam. The clergy predict the nearing conversion of Ajarians not because they can change their religion, but because they supposedly were never really Muslim. Against this background the importance of Saint Andrew and the references to the perdurability of Christianity become clear. The story of Saint Andrew reinforced the idea of Georgia being a Christian nation par excellence and Ajaria being an indivisible part of that history, thus giving moral weight to the church in its attempts to Christianize Ajaria. Moreover, by claiming that Ajarians secretly visited the church or used Christian symbols, the clergy and the intelligentsia ‘prove’ the perdurability of Christianity. This enables the clergy and intelligentsia to hold on to the claim that the Georgian nation and Christianity are an indivisible whole.

The imposition of these dominant views in Ajaria prompts the question how the inhabitants realign ideological narratives with their own life- and family-histories. The villagers who attended the described supra disagreed on the consequences of the historical narrative of the clergy and the intelligentsia. When they were amongst themselves, the villagers countered the argument by saying that they lived not in the past but in the present. But, as we will see, it has been difficult to maintain this stance in present-day Ajaria. This is so because a Muslim counter narrative was not developed during the past eighty years, but also because the villagers’ lives are embedded in social contexts in which the dominant Christian-Georgian narrative plays an important role.

In this case study, I am particularly interested in the role of dominant ideas in past and present processes of identification. The programmatic work of Eric Wolf is very useful as a guideline for how this issue can be approached. To understand the role of dominant ideas in human life, he wrote, we should “look for the ways in which the chains of signification laden with power come to overlay, dominate, ‘enchain’ other signifiers and signifieds: we can also look for the effects of such dominance, as well as for any efforts to counter and resist it” (2001: 379). Such dominant ideas have their own genealogies, and tracing these can reveal the historical development of the relations between religious, ethnic and national identities in the context of changing economic and political configurations. Citing Wolf once more, we should “understand the social processes of identity-making and identity-unmaking as responses to historically unfolding processes” (ibid. 368). For Wolf this means paying close attention to the interplay of general processes and local responses. To better understand these local responses, especially when dealing with the construction
and deconstruction of identities, he maintains, it is vital to “stress the significance of everyday activities” (ibid: 355). The religious changes on the frontier need to be understood in relation to historically constituted power-balance in which particular discourses of religion and nationality emerged, came to dominate and enchain others.

OUTLINE OF PART I

Chapter One discusses historical changes in the relation between religion, nation and state. It traces the genealogy of the myth of Georgian-Christian primordiality, discusses how the myth was advanced during the Soviet period and how it gradually came to dominate other historical narratives. The discrepancies between the contemporary Georgian-Christian myth and nineteenth century descriptions of religious life in Ajaria serves not only to deconstruct the myth, but also and more importantly, to criticize the validity of theories that explain the return of religion in the public sphere in terms of ‘frozen pre-Soviet’ traditions. Contrary to these theories I maintain that Soviet rule constituted more than a ‘veneer’ beneath which traditional practices could continue undisturbed or be preserved in ‘authentic’ form. The exclusion of Islam from the public sphere and the simultaneous integration of Ajaria into Soviet Georgian society held great consequences for post-Soviet religious trajectories. I will show that Georgian nationalist discourse became so effective in Ajaria during the Soviet period precisely because of the influence of state-atheism, which (at least partly) disconnected Georgian national identity from religion. In a sense, Ajarians could be Georgians in public while remaining Muslim at home. This state of affairs changed in the late 1980s when, in the wake of national resurgence, Georgian nationality was tightly connected to Christianity. The chapter ends with an analysis of the strategies of Christian and Muslim leaders to advance their cause within a state that blatantly favors Christianity. By describing the intertwining of politics and religion, the chapter will sketch the wider contexts within which peoples’ dealings with opposing and intertwining religious and national discourses can be understood.

Chapter Two asks why the position of Islam has become increasingly difficult in the public and private spheres. The argument put forward is that in the post-Soviet era increased expectations of what being a Muslim entailed ran counter to increased demands for displaying loyalty to the Georgian nation. This discrepancy forced Muslims to articulate their social identities in new ways. By discussing the stories that people tell about their lives and documenting the dilemmas they encounter in daily life, the chapter analyzes how people’s choices and interpretations relate to their social biographies and how they are embedded in processes of political and economic change. The general decline of Islam is accompanied, and partly contradicted, by new interpretations of religious and national identities and new ways to integrate these in aspirations for the future.
Chapter Three focuses on those inhabitants of Ajaria that have abandoned Islam and converted to Christianity. The argument made is that conversion to Christianity in Upper Ajaria in the 1990s can be understood as attempts to realign history and community with a strong sense of national identity among converts. But although the intention of conversion was to restore historical and societal incongruities, the act of baptism was often disruptive in nature. This situation can be understood by viewing Ajaria as a frontier society in which local and national traditions intertwine and clash. In many respects the converts are the embodiment of post-Soviet Christian Georgian lifestyle and pursue a restoration of what they perceive as a Christian-Georgian historical unity, which at the same time embodies promises for a 'modern' future. In doing so they severed social ties with their direct social surroundings, their families and neighbors. To soften this tension converts mobilize a host of metaphors that evoke the historical Christian legacy, demonize the 'other' embodied by the Turk or the Ottoman epoch, and point to the progressive nature of Christianity and its role in alleviating Ajaria’s ‘backwardness.’ However these ideologically informed narratives can only partly resolve the tensions involved in conversion. It is only by mobilizing ancestors as metaphors and symbolic actors in conversion that national discourses can be effectively integrated in social life and that disruptions of genealogy can be restored.

Lastly, chapter Four draws on the previous sections and examines how the return of religion to the public sphere relates to the changing religious frontier. It reviews the social organization of, and control over, potential meanings of religion after state atheism, and aims to understand the process of religious change on the micro level as intertwined in the play of larger and more powerful forces. It argues that the initial ‘freedom’ that people had in appropriating religious labels to construct identities became increasingly limited during the first ten years of postsocialism. Because inhabitants of Upper Ajaria are constantly confronted with the opposing tendencies of Islamic and Georgian-national discourses, they are forced to take sides. The result is the emergence of new religious boundaries on the frontier of the Muslim and Christian realms.