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Special issue: Urban Religious Pluralization: Challenges and Opportunities in the post-Soviet South Caucasus

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Special issue: Urban Religious Pluralization: Challenges and Opportunities in the post-Soviet South Caucasus - Introduction

by TSYPYLMA DARIEVA (Centre for East European and international Studies) and
JULIE MCBRIEN (University of Amsterdam)

In the spring of 2020, tough measures imposed in the South Caucasus to manage the coronavirus pandemic coincided with some major religious holidays, including Orthodox Christian Easter and Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting. In all three countries of the South Caucasus (Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia), governments called on their citizens to stay at home and not to gather in churches, attend mosques for Friday prayers, visit holy sites or go on pilgrimages. Most religious institutions indeed remained closed and offered online alternatives, such as the Armenian Apostolic Church in Georgia. However, the dominant Georgian Orthodox Church largely continued to hold its traditional services in person. Moreover, despite the government's exhortations, the churches kept their doors open for Easter celebrations in Georgia, and the government-imposed restrictions were largely ignored by the Church and faithful alike. Holy Communion and the associated practice of using a common spoon for the distribution of wine to communicants were sharply criticized, especially by members of the opposition and the liberal churches, due to the high risk of infection.

This continued adherence to traditional religious practices in churches has cast the special role and authority of the Orthodox Church in Georgia into sharp relief. By contrast, the leaders of Georgia's Muslims suspended prayer meetings during Ramadan, while the Catholic Church and the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia opted to livestream Sunday services. Despite the increased risk of the virus being spread by tra-

ditional religious practices, the Georgian government was reluctant to impose emergency rules on the Orthodox Church. In contrast, in Azerbaijan, all the mosques, churches, synagogues and holy sites were closed on government orders as part of an initial package of measures to control the virus. On 17 March 2020, the Administration of Muslims of the Caucasus (QMI) announced that the faithful had a duty to comply with this decision. The strictly observed quarantine regime remained in force even after the start of Ramadan, which, since 1993, has been regarded as Azerbaijan's most important Muslim holiday. The breaking of the fast each evening (*iftar*) took place at home, and restaurants that would have normally served holy food during Ramadan remained closed. The different responses of faith leaders in Georgia and Armenia to coronavirus crisis control measures, as well as variations in how these measures were set and enforced by the respective states, reflect not only the religious diversity of the South Caucasus and differences in the relationship between religion and the state, but also the different tactics religious minorities used to mediate their religious expressions and practices of religious place-making.

This special issue focuses on the ways in which religious plurality unfolds in the South Caucasus and more precisely how religious minorities cope with uncomfortable situations by finding and developing religious spaces and places in the post-Soviet urban environment. Cities in the South Caucasus have had a long history of religiously diverse populations, the presence of

which has marked the cities in important ways, including the vibrant presence of multiple, religiously defined neighbourhoods (Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2012). During the socialist period, however, the limitations placed on religion and the support for scientific atheism circumscribed the space for public expressions of religion and the concomitant ability of religion, and of religious diversity, to shape urban environments (Khalid 2007). The ties between religion and ethno-national belonging were strengthened, even though the practice of religion was significantly circumscribed, producing 'majority' religions that matched the titular nationalities of the republics, the largest proportions of their populations and religious minorities with other ethno-national-religious backgrounds. While ethno-national identity thrived in urban spaces, public expressions of religion declined dramatically under socialism without ever disappearing entirely.

With the end of socialism, the space for public expressions of religion has increased, including in urban settings. Post-Soviet urban spaces are now religiously shaped and textured in ways that were previously unimaginable. Yet, in the literature, post-Soviet cities have mostly been viewed as secular settings (e.g., Alexander and Buchli 2007). The economic, political and infrastructural changes that accompanied the collapse of socialism and the way this impacted on urban environments and their dwellers has been explored (e.g. Nazpary 2002, Collier 2011, Fehlings 2016). Portraits of chaos and breakdown, followed by depictions of the growth, spectacle, ruralisation, illegality and inequality wrought by capitalism, pepper the literature (Bissenova 2017, Trevisani 2018, Isabaeva 2021). Only recently has research begun to address what is variously discussed as the urban 'religious revival', 're-sacralization processes', or the 'nationalization' of religious belief and practice in urban spaces (Bissenova 2016, Nasritdinov and Esenamanova 2017, Nasritdinov 2018, Kormina 2020). Much attention has been paid to the dynamics of restoring religious worlds in urban spaces by the largest religions of the former Soviet Union (Orthodox Christianity,

Sunni Islam), including the spectacular (re)building of churches and mosques in city centres. Usually sponsored by state agencies, these extravagant buildings now mark and reshape the urban skyline, sitting alongside grand monuments and other urban prestige projects (Bissenova 2016, Serrano 2016, Wanner 2018, Darieva 2020). Pilgrimage, religious educational projects, and missionary endeavours have likewise marked post-socialist cities (Wanner 2012, Darieva et al 2018, Kormina 2020), if in less spectacular ways, as has the rise of pious forms of consumption, like halal-dining, religious fashion shops and beauty salons – particularly urban forms of capitalist leisure (Kapustina 2016, Stephan-Emmrich and Mirzoev 2016, Bissenova 2017, Nasritdinov and Schröder 2017, Puppo and Schmoller 2020).

One of the most widely shared characteristics of religion across many post-Soviet societies is the tension between the right to religious freedom on the one hand and the revitalisation of religion as an aspect of post-Socialist nation-building on the other. Both have impacted on urban landscapes and make for a new and variegated presence of public religion. Relative religious freedom has facilitated the growth of minority religions, including those practiced by long-standing, internal religious minorities, and of smaller, newer religions in the region. At the same time, this growth in minority religions is being challenged by the revitalisation of religion as an aspect of post-socialist nation-building and the incumbent re-establishment of religious infrastructure, including grand churches and mosques in the main cities, of official religious education in urban centres, and of religious and national symbolism in urban public spaces (Serrano 2016), all of which mark urban-cum-national landscapes and their national actors as belonging to the majority religion (Wanner 2020). Giving new significance to post-Socialist elites and to the reconfiguration of national identities after socialism, public displays of religious piety and religious processions are often used as tools of maintaining political regimes (Serrano 2015, Koch et al. 2018, Tateo 2020). Within

these frameworks, current debates on the return of religion often remain too bounded in the national heritage paradigms of one specific country and one specific religion. This methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002) precludes attending to minority religions and religiously plural environments. Taking a comparative view and systematically investigating religious diversity in urban spaces as a modern condition and everyday experience remain largely unaddressed topics.

Only recently has there been an interest in diverse experiences of urban religious presence and lived religious multiplicity (Burchardt and Becci 2013, 2016, Mahmood 2015, Meyer 2020) as contributing to the construction of urban identities, but this has largely come from research outside the former Soviet world. Emerging research on post-socialist societies offers fruitful ground for further investigation. For example, as mentioned above, research on religious consumption and entrepreneurship (halal shops, pilgrimage infrastructure, faith-based fashion and lifestyle) sees religious observance as going beyond state-sponsored religious institutions and the domestic sphere to become an aspect of modern urban living (McBrien 2009, Stephan-Emmrich 2018, Bissenova 2017, Puppo and Schmoller 2020). Religious pluralization is emerging beyond the mainstream national faiths that are unfolding in urban spaces, producing a set of challenges for local administrations, normative orders and majority perceptions. This includes the negotiation of religion's 'proper' place in the urban environment – another field ripe for investigation.

In general, there is a lack of exploration of religiously diverse experiences in post-socialist cities, and especially in the South Caucasus. These urban centres are arenas for manifestations of multiple faiths and are shaped by both local and global forces, as well as the effects of neoliberal and authoritarian rule. Urban spaces are the sites in which practitioners of multiple faiths, including minority religions, work out their religious lives. They are likewise spaces where claims to national belonging, heritage and property are negotiated

and contested, a complex process, especially in light of the sway of institutionalized religion-state relations and spatial frameworks dominated by the secular authorities and mainstream religions. The institutionalization, regulation, and management of religious plurality on the one hand, and the ways diverse practitioners appropriate their places of worship in post-Soviet cities on the other, reveal novel forms of religious expression and control. In addition, they draw attention to the place-making functions of religious practices as mechanisms of social inclusion and exclusion, to the local 'situatedness' of minorities, and to suppressed spiritualities and alternative forms of urban religiosity. Finally, they raise questions about how religious minorities are turned into new 'strangers' in the city, the nature of their symbolic and material resources, and the extent to which their visible or non-visible materiality and religious practices contribute to spiritual co-existence or tensions.

This special issue brings together five fresh ethnographic studies of minority religions in post-Soviet urban spaces, examining the range of negotiations and struggles that practitioners face in the multireligious cities of the South Caucasus. Looking at a variety of religious minorities in Georgia and Azerbaijan, this special issue contributes to debates on faith in post-socialist countries by shifting the gaze to religious minorities, and by looking in particular at urban environments and their power relations. These cities offer fruitful arenas for the study of the dynamic, but often uncertain and nearly always contested nature of religious pluralization in a borderland region. In these post-socialist urban sites, negotiations and struggles for religious spaces merge with the Soviet legacy of secularism, post-industrial cities and national ideologies to create complex terrains for the making and living of religious lives.

Soviet Socialism and its Legacies in Southern Eurasian Cities

While the ideals of socialism were never fully realized, Soviet secularism was remarkably suc-

cessfully in altering religious landscapes in the Caucasus and Central Asia, including the production and expansion of a new kind of secularism. These changes occurred in rural and urban spaces alike, but cities, as sites perceived to be especially ripe for the cultivation of modernity, including the new socialist atheist person, were particularly targeted as loci of transformation and progress.

During the atheist campaigns of the 1920s and 1930s, in both rural and urban areas places of worship and veneration were destroyed or access to them was highly regulated. The same occurred with religious texts and sacred objects. Religious scholars and leaders were persecuted, and for those who remained the space for their learning, teaching and guiding was drastically reduced. Many public rituals and public religious practices were curtailed. The state exerted its newly enshrined legal right to regulate key life-cycle events like the legitimation and regulation of parentage or marriage. Importantly, during these attacks on religion, secular spaces and rituals were also created and expanded (Lane 1981; Luerhmann 2015, Smolkin 2018). For example, education and the sciences were transferred into the domain of the secular and came to be provided and regulated by the state. The position of the atheist was established as a real option within society (Hann, et al. 2006, Wanner 2012: 11, Pelkmans 2014).

The influence of religion in urban spaces was likewise reduced, often through the destruction, alteration and reappropriation of religious buildings. The slow modification and disappearance of certain forms of dress, like the various forms of women's head and face coverings, changed the visual texture of cities, just as the disappearance or limitation of sounds, like the call to prayer or the ringing of church bells, impacted on their aural religious texture. Places of worship were desecrated and in many cases converted to utilitarian purposes. Religious buildings were repurposed and turned into sites for storage, production or education, including as museums for atheist or local history. The Armenian Church in Batumi

and the Blue Mosque in Yerevan, for example, were used as planetariums (Darieva 2016). At the same time, new Soviet cities produced spaces for secular progress, society and belonging. Cities were sites of local, regional and national governments, hubs of scientific research and innovation, centres of culture, and generally loci for the cultivation of a modern way of life, all of which were assumed and intended to be free of religion. In urban places, the production and performance of Soviet secularism, including that of the atheist Soviet person, were particularly strong. At the same time, many museums and educational centres were located in preserved churches and mosques which served as historical monuments, in this way acquiring an ambiguous secular-religious value as part of the urban heritage.

Nevertheless, despite these changes, people across Central Asia and the Caucasus found ways to live their religions in different environments, with slightly more possibilities in the countryside and fewer in urban centres. Deaths were still marked by religious rituals, saints were venerated, and the elderly became the bearers of communal religious practice when the young and middle-aged were less inclined or unable to do so (Dragadze 2003, Grant 2011). Religion and ethno-national belonging became intimately linked such that they became nearly impossible to separate (Khaled 2007, Hann and Pelkmans 2009, McBrien 2017). Anti-religious campaigns impacted on and curtailed religion in various ways. Nevertheless, these campaigns, when combined with other profound social and political processes, also worked to change religion, which continued in unexpected ways. (Steinberg and Wanner 2008, Shtyrkov and Kormina 2015).

When the Soviet Union collapsed and its republics became independent secular nation states, one of the first reforms to be introduced in 1991 was the law of religious freedom. The majority of the post-Soviet states allowed for a greater degree of public religious expression, decreased the regulation of religion, and facilitated greater connection to global religious currents. Yet it was late-socialist religiosity that

continued and flourished immediately in the post-socialist years (McBrien 2017). Continuity in ideas about religion and the nation, which were cultivated over the long socialist period, also persisted long after the ending of the Soviet Union. For example, despite being officially secular states, most post-socialist nations promoted religion as an elemental aspect of national belonging in their national building endeavours (Steinberg and Wanner 2008, Ghodsee 2007, Hann and Pelkmans 2009, McBrien 2017), if in sometimes amorphous, ambient ways (Wanner 2020). Soviet atheism too left important traces in politics, in people's dispositions, and in understandings of everyday life in the post-socialist period (Pelkmans 2017:101).

It would take decades for the contemporary religious plurality to emerge. The diversity resulted from the complex growth of longstanding, majority religions (i.e. Orthodox Christianity and Islam) with the simultaneous arrival of regionally new interpretations of these same religions, like charismatic Protestant churches and the Tablighi Jamaat, and new religious communities like the Hare Krishna (Hann, et. al 2006, Hilgers 2009, Wanner 2012, Pelkmans 2017). Yet despite these temporal and spatial continuities, the resumption of public religious life, the regulation of religious diversity and its relationship with contemporary independent states varied, especially in the cases of Azerbaijan and Georgia under consideration here. Today the continually emerging and changing modes of religious life that grew out of the late socialist and early post-socialist period compete and co-exist with a variety of new aspirations introduced by missionaries and global religious movements.

Urban rhythms after socialism

Cities such as Baku, Tbilisi and Batumi were sites of the Soviet Russian periphery, where post-socialist city planning and urban infrastructures (*microrayon* residential structures, water and electricity supply, roads and communications, green spaces and Soviet cultural centres) uniquely shaped the secularity of public

spaces.¹ While some secularist legacies from the Soviet past persist in these urban spaces, over the last thirty years cities have become vibrant centres of religious life, drawing into question long-held assumptions about the secularising effects of Soviet urbanisation. In the context of new national politics, religion has begun to reshape these bastions of former socialist progress, altering their skylines, rhythms, populations and governance (Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2012).

Among the most profound examples of changes to the urban landscape are the construction of spectacular shrines, churches and mega-mosques in city-centre locations close to giant shopping malls and monolith parking lots (Serrano 2016, Koch et al 2018). The monumental state-funded Holy Trinity Cathedral in Tbilisi, commonly known as the Sameba Church, the Hazret Mosque in Nur-Sultan (former Astana) and the Heydar Mosque in Baku, erected in the 2010s, are prominent examples. This growth in religious urban landscapes is part and parcel of wider trends in urbanization. Urbanity has become the desirable global standard in the twentieth century, and regional metropolises such as Baku or Batumi in the South Caucasus are no different. Since 1991, they have become arenas for prestige projects and nation-branding, based on neo-liberal processes of privatisation that have turned them into attractive sites for new state-sponsored aspirations. In particular, Baku and Batumi, port cities on the Black Sea and the Caspian respectively, have become leaders in implementing new modernising (beautification) projects, at least on the level of shiny materiality. These urban centres aim to achieve global significance, as seen in Baku's new branding as 'the Dubai of the Caspian Sea' (Grant 2014, Valiyev 2014, Darieva 2015).

Radical urban change and the restructuring of urban spaces generated by privatization, includ-

¹ A microrayon is a typical Soviet urban neighbourhood structure with prefabricated five-storey or high-rise residential buildings, wide streets and squares, cheap public transportation, and some recreational facilities and green leisure spots.

ing aggressive market principles and rampant corruption, have marked the everyday landscapes of these cities over the last thirty years. Interestingly, housing, courtyards and recreational spaces are increasingly being shaped not only by the power of the city's 'growth machine' and economic elites (Valiyev 2014), but also by religious actors whose sacred symbols, ritual acts and religious observances, often sponsored by economic elites and initiated by activists, are providing these spaces with new textures. Cities face the demolition of historical buildings and vanishing green spaces, which in many cases in Georgia, like Russia, have been appropriated by the clergy and have become an arena for the exercise of the Georgian Orthodox Church's power, which has the right to seize urban parks and other green areas. Finally, the construction boom has affected the urban skyline of the city not only in terms of the new triumphal aesthetics and urban materiality, but also in respect of shifts in the topography of faith. Religiously grounded urban lifestyles and recreational activities, from diet trends and fashion to media and leisure activity, though in condensed and spatialized forms, nonetheless require an infrastructure to meet the new need for religiously textured forms of consumption.

In addition to these altered physical topographies, the impact of a post-Soviet urban public religion is felt in the constellation of the urban populations and its new kind of religious diversity. For instance, whereas in the pre-Soviet and Soviet periods Christian communities in Azerbaijan were limited to Russian Orthodoxy and the Armenian Apostolic Church, today the scope of Christian religious organizations has widened to include Protestant evangelical churches, among others.² The same is true of Georgia. Religious

minorities provide a new challenge for local authorities in the South Caucasus cities. Some religious minorities in Georgia and Azerbaijan are treated with mistrust by authorities (e.g. so-called 'new' Muslims and Protestants), while others are not (Russian Orthodox Christians and Jews). Post-socialist cities thus become spaces for negotiating and living this religious plurality, where simultaneous closure and openness define uneven interactions between the authorities and religious minorities. For instance, in Baku, the state targets some Islamic prayer houses for restrictive control and persecution (as demonstrated by government officials forcing religious men to have their beards shaved), while it also celebrates its new policy of tolerance by promoting cultural acceptance and offering a staged plan for peaceful cohabitation between those who are perceived as 'traditional' Muslims, Christians and Jews.³ Although both countries have freedom of religion guaranteed in their constitutions, various amendments and restrictions are widely used by local administrations to control religious activities.

Religious minorities themselves face difficulties in maintaining their religious observances in the city, and in building and sustaining the reli-

there are at least 748 sacred folk Islamic and popular pilgrimage sites associated with the healing and veneration of saints (State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, 2017; see Darieva 2020). In Georgia, while 83 per cent of the population belong to the Orthodox Church, about 11 per cent is made up of Sunni and Shia Muslims, 3 per cent belong to the Armenian Apostolic Church. A further 3 per cent of the population consists of Roman Catholics, Yezidis, Greek Orthodox Christians, Jews and a growing number of non-traditional religious groups, such as Baptists, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, the International Society of Krishna Consciousness and the Baha'i faith (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2018. See www.geostat.de).

³ In authoritarian societies such as Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, there is much fear of 'excessive' and 'foreign' forms of religiosity in public spaces. The 2011 Law on Religious Activities prohibited having previously existing and mainly Muslim prayer rooms in state offices and at public universities in Kazakhstan. In Azerbaijan public manifestations of religious practices have been prohibited outside houses of worship since 2015.

² According to the State Committee for Work with Religious Organisations, as of 2017, 136 mosques, eleven churches, three synagogues, two Baha'i community centres and one Krishna community centre had been registered in the capital city, Baku, which has a population of 2.2 million. Nationally, there are approximately 2,250 mosques, thirty churches, seven synagogues and three Baha'i centres. In addition,

religious infrastructures upon which their religious worlds depend. They tend to lack educational centres and houses of worship, face legal discrimination and are unable to meet the requirements for state and city registration. In various Georgian cities, for example, Muslim, Armenian Apostolic and Catholic communities experience administrative barriers in obtaining construction permits to build new prayer houses or restore existing ones. For instance, despite multiple requests, the City Hall of the religiously mixed city of Batumi has refused to issue a building permit for a new mosque, and the dispute over the construction site remains unresolved. In another example, an attempt by Roman Catholic Georgians to build a new church in the centre of the city of Rustavi proved impossible.

Religious pluralization in the South Caucasus takes different forms, yet it is dominated by a shared history in which majority religions and their incumbent titular ethno-national populations are able to exercise large degrees of power over minority religions on the one hand, and secular projects and actors on the other. In Georgia, for example, the government cooperates closely with the Georgian Orthodox Church to interfere in the activity of alternative religious communities (Rcheulishvili 2015, Serrano 2016). So-called 'non-traditional' faiths, in particular Jehovah's Witnesses and charismatic Protestant churches, are regarded as a 'danger' and 'threat' to national identity or as a bad 'western influence' on local traditions throughout the region.

In this volume, we discuss a variety of issues relating to pluralization, including moves by the state and majority religions to control minority religious practice, as well as the negotiations religious minorities must pursue in their encounters with dominant religious and non-religious settings. Moreover, by utilizing the dual lenses of the urban and the religious, we also attempt to open up new avenues for thinking about the politics of everyday urban life and the meanings of space (Burchardt 2017). In many ways, urban spaces provide stages of observation through which to capture and show how lived religious diversity is

unfolding 'on the ground' (Burchardt and Becci 2013, Knott et al. 2016). Ultimately, our aim is to understand how growing religious plurality in the cities is regulated and experienced by practitioners, how faith-based communities within certain religious traditions re-establish and create their places of prayer and religious ceremonies, what new meanings religious architecture in the city is acquiring, and how religious activities and symbols are incorporated or not incorporated into urban and national narratives. Thus, this special issue aims to provide a nuanced perspective on lived experiences of the religious and the urban, and generally seeks to offer insights into and specific patterns of religious pluralization in the contemporary Caucasus. By taking into account political ideals of management, such as Soviet-style control, we reveal different forms of social exclusion in increasingly autocratic post-socialist societies and a variety of coping strategies of less institutionalised religiosity.

Findings of this collection

This special issue brings together five case studies based on fresh ethnographic research, which examine a range of the negotiations and struggles that are necessary for practicing less-institutionalized religiosity in post-Soviet urban spaces. Looking at a variety of religious minorities in post-Soviet cities in Georgia and Azerbaijan, it argues that these urban spaces are fruitful arenas for studying dynamic religious pluralization in borderland regions, where negotiations and struggles for religious spaces take place in the context of Soviet legacies, contemporary national projects and global urban and capitalist trends.

One of the most striking commonalities across all five papers is that the lives of religious minorities in cities in the South Caucasus are strongly constrained by the influence of majority religions precisely because of the way majority religions are inextricably tied to the titular ethno-national groups and their influence in state bureaucracies, legislation and national politics (Komakhidze). The legacies of Soviet secularism that inadver-

tently tied the two live on and are gaining new ground in contemporary religious and national politics. Moreover, the legacies of Soviet socialism shape the modalities for dealing with plurality and cultural demarcations. Nevertheless, current capitalist flows create new possibilities and new frictions, which interact with, transform and are transformed by these legacies.

Despite the difficulties and uncertainties involved, members of religious minorities develop tactics to make a space for their religious practices by appropriating places of worship and re-establishing their presence in the city. They find creative ways to cope with uncertainty, with limited access to resources and influence, and in light of the competition spurred by religious diversity (Aliyeva, Darieva). Some search for forms of co-existence by playing down ethno-religious difference and developing new patriotic spirits (Aliyeva, Fehlings), thus demonstrating their loyalty to the existing political regime and carefully observing legal regulations. Others seek cooperation with religious 'others' in everyday life, including business interactions, in order to protect themselves through practices of commensality and inclusivity. To create trust and greater acceptance for 'newcomers', they construct themselves as useful partners and peaceful communities in opposition to so-called 'non-traditional' religious communities that are regarded as dangerous and politically motivated.

Religious minorities also play strategically with their visibility or non-visibility, for example, by utilizing private places for worship or avoiding public funds to stay out of sight and thus avoid regulation or being targeted (Darieva, Kamushadze). They practice a fluid religious place-making, using religious places temporarily, or creating multi-religious or semi-religious places to avoid scrutiny or to get around prohibitive registration or building codes (Aliyeva and Komakhidze). The dynamic between visibility and invisibility can change, for example, through the use of buildings that may not have had a religious connection initially, but are subsequently used for religious practices. They practice rituals, like

prayer, in spaces that go beyond traditional and visible houses of worship (Darieva).

Post-Soviet cities have largely been neglected in scholarship on urban religion. Building on case studies in Azerbaijan and Georgia, our aim is to develop a perspective in which urban spaces are seen as tangible sites for the exploration of religious minorities and their life-worlds, as well as being, the other way around, cases in which we can examine how cities are lived and made by religious actors and how these actors, in turn, cultivate uniquely urban forms of religiosity. The five articles presented here discuss the experiences of less institutionalized, but long-standing local minority faiths, as well as new 'strangers' in the city. They attend to the reconfigurations of urban places into religious spaces, the new hierarchical interactions between authorities and religious actors 'on the ground', the legacies of post-Soviet discourses of ethno-religious majority and minorities, and the ways in which secular and religious worlds overlap and confront each other in post-socialist societies.

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Encountering Informal and Invisible Religious Diversity in Post-Soviet Azerbaijan*

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Abstract

This paper explores religious place-making as part of informal religious pluralization in autocratic Azerbaijan and examines how restrictive top-down state regulations may affect less institutionalized faith communities. It does so by focusing on the process of negotiation and a set of religious practices aimed at the symbolic and material appropriation of urban spaces. How do less institutionalized ‘practitioners’ and urban religious leaders respond to the shrinking space for religious freedom, and how are faith practices mediated in concrete spaces? To answer these questions, I provide two empirical examples of religious place-making in Baku, a vernacular Shia sacred site on the one hand, and the Bahai community, a non-Muslim religious minority, on the other. Without suggesting that these examples exhaustively capture the dynamics around religious pluralization, I draw attention to the interplay between the ideological power of state interventions and informal and creative religious place-making in the city. The contribution identifies the restrained visibility of folk shrines and the invisibility of Bahai practitioners that become part of an urban social reality and mundane use of urban and residential spaces. By sharing space with non-religious actors, religious practitioners use a variety of urban spaces on a temporary basis.

Keywords: religious place-making, post-Soviet Azerbaijan, shrinking religious freedom, minorities, folk shrines, Bahai community, Baku

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the discussion on the limits of and possibilities for religious plurality and religious place-making in post-Soviet Azerbaijan. Since gaining independence in 1991, Azerbaijan has seen a resurgence in religion, with a growing number and

diversity of houses of worship and sacred sites. More recently, however, there has been a radical shift in state-faith relations from an initial liberal, welcoming policy to restrictive measures and increased state control over religious practices in public spaces. In particular, in the 2010s, the Azerbaijani state authorities imposed a set of strict regulations on religious freedom.

This paper draws attention to informal religious place-making as part of religious pluralization in Azerbaijan and examines how top-down state regulations may affect less institutionalized faith communities in the city of Baku. By place-making, I mean a process of negotiation and a set of religious practices aimed at the symbolic and material appropriation of urban spaces through

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which a religious community finds its own niche in the fabric of urban life. Thus, my use of the term 'place-making' in this paper includes crucial understandings of religious place-making elaborated in Western European urban contexts (Vasquez and Knott 2014, Becci et al. 2016), but it goes beyond what is mainly associated with keeping or seeking a place in already religiously marked terrains. This paper seeks to provide a more nuanced picture for understanding the specific limits and potential of religious plurality in post-Soviet autocratic Azerbaijan.

Religious diversity in Azerbaijan has not only found expression in a multiplicity of faiths and a growing number of religious actors; it has also taken on a new dimension in the ways practitioners create a variety of worship sites in the city.

While Azerbaijan is usually associated with Islam, it is also home to a variety of non-Muslim groups. The number of houses of worship for Muslims and Christians in the country grew from thirty in 1989 to 2,500 in 2018. According to the State Committee for Working with Religious Organizations (SCWRO), 136 mosques, eleven churches, three synagogues, two Bahai centres and one Krishna community centre were registered in the capital city of Baku (population 2.3 million) in 2017. Nationally there are approximately 2,250 mosques, thirty churches, seven synagogues and three Bahai centres. At the same time, one should not underestimate the existence of more than 748 popular Islamic saint and pilgrimage sites (*pir* and *ziyarat-gah*) associated with traditional saint veneration.

According to our observations, the current religious plurality in Azerbaijan does not reflect a return to pre-Soviet religious constellations with relatively rigid boundaries between institutionalized Shia Islam, Russian Orthodox Christianity, the Armenian Apostolic Church and Jewish communities. Rather, there is a new constellation of large and small, newly arrived and old faiths, which underwent a significant change during the Soviet period. All religious organizations, their activities and leaders are now subject to regulations shaped by Soviet-style secularism,

current socio-political regimes and transnational forces.

While preserving secularism as a set of institutional arrangements for separating politics from religion, the Azerbaijani state does not deny its Islamic heritage. According to official statistics, Shias constituted 60 to 65 per cent of the total Muslim population in 2018 and Sunnis 35 to 40 per cent. The number of Sunni Muslims in Azerbaijan is also increasing (Balci and Goyushov 2012). Due to external influences from Turkey, Iran and Russia, Azerbaijan is witnessing a growing variety of Muslim practices and schools that are constantly challenging the secular power and administrative authorities (Jödicke 2017; Goyushov 2019). To manage this internal Muslim diversity and counter the opposition to it from Shia Islam, the state has elaborated a variety of strategies, including the idea of promoting a national 'proper' Islam. This innovative ideology has found expression, for instance, in the construction of the spectacular new Heydar mega-mosque in Baku. Built in 2016 as a prayer hall for simultaneous use by both Sunni and Shia Muslims, the mega-mosque stands for a 'good' and 'united' Islam in Azerbaijan.

Another local Islamic tradition that is often overlooked by scholars in contemporary urban and religious diversity studies is related to an informal and vernacular form of Islam in Azerbaijan: popular folk beliefs in saints and the healing power of sacred, usually rural sites known as *pir* and *ziyarat gah*. Religious beliefs and practices around these sites can be classified as a 'little tradition' of Islam in opposition to the 'great tradition' of texts and official doctrine (Redfield 1955, Grant 2011, Darieva 2018). They are, however, by no means insignificant for urban society: visits to *pir* shrines and *ziyarat gah* are an important part of the everyday life of Azerbaijanis. Unlike the scriptural Islam practised in the mosques, shrines and sacred sites are 'independent' from the institutionalized religious infrastructure and clergy. Until recently they were managed and maintained by ordinary individuals and informal caretakers, in many cases by women.



Figure 1. State sponsored Heydar Mosque in Baku, built in 2017. 2019, Source: Tsypylma Darieva

The aim of this paper is to analyse how grassroots practitioners create their own places and appropriate urban spaces in view of the changes to urban materialities and the increasing pressure from the administrative authorities. How do less institutionalized ‘practitioners’ and urban religious leaders respond to the shrinking space for religious freedom, and how are faith practices mediated in concrete spaces? To answer these questions, I will turn to Baku, the capital city of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and provide insights into two examples of religious place-making, a vernacular Shia sacred site in central Baku on the one hand, and the Bahai community, a non-Muslim religious minority, on the other. Without suggesting that these examples exhaustively capture the dynamics around religious pluralization and urban religious place-making, I draw attention to the interplay between the ideological power of state interventions and informal and creative religious place-making in the city. Post-Soviet Baku functions today as a ‘laboratory’ of social change

in which a variety of religious movements and a strong state secularism exist side by side, generating modern configurations that co-produce urban religious spaces and multiple moralities.

What follows is an overview of recent state interventions and administrative regulations for religious life and its governance in Azerbaijan. I then move to my empirical material in Baku, highlighting informal and temporary forms of appropriating urban spaces. The analysis is based on my ethnographic observations, interviews and informal conversations at selected religious sites in the city, which I carried out during my fieldwork in Baku in 2015, 2018 and 2019. Thirty qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with a variety of religious leaders at different religious sites and urban experts who are involved in managing the religious sphere in Azerbaijan.

Governing the religious in post-Soviet Azerbaijan

While some studies refer to increasing religious pluralization in post-Soviet societies (Pelkmans

2017; Alisauskiene and Schröder 2016; Wanner 2007), the question of how religious pluralization unfolds in urban contexts in the post-Soviet southern Caucasus has been largely overlooked. When analysing the post-Soviet return of religion to public spaces in the Caucasus, we should not disregard the fact that religious matters were not entirely suppressed in the Soviet period and that they have been significantly changed (Dragadze 1993). There were, in fact, particular ideals and tools for preserving religion as a state-sponsored 'tradition' based on the Soviet-style infrastructure of regulating relations between faith and the state. In this context, anthropologists have identified the centrality of the notion of religious belonging, not beliefs as such, as they have lost their original meaning in post-Soviet societies (Smolkin 2018). The notion of belonging still affects the way religion and its expression are perceived and practiced in the post-Soviet world (Luehrmann 2012; Wanner 2015; McBrien 2017). By highlighting the urban Azerbaijani context in Baku, I draw attention to the secularized example in the Islamic world, where religious belonging generally coincides with ethnic and language affiliations, and where there is no fixed normative religious system and knowledge that regulates people's everyday lives. In the view of Azerbaijani secular elites, as the majority religion, Islam should be preserved as a cultural feature and as part of the country's national heritage, rather than being used a social and political resource. As one of the ideologues of the post-Soviet policy towards Islam emphasized in his interview, 'Faith is a matter of individual choice that should be practised in private rooms.'¹

Over the last twenty years, there has been a significant transformation of religious policy. Two periods of Azerbaijani state policies on religion can be discerned. The 1990s were a period of relative freedom in religious activities, in particular during and after the Karabakh war (1988-1994),

when the Azerbaijani government welcomed many Christian missionaries and Islamic charitable organizations. The 2000s and 2010s, conversely, saw the re-introduction of a centralized policy of controlling religious groups and their expressions in public spaces. This process has been influenced by political and social factors that are driving the state to respond more rigorously to perceived external threats and oppositional religious activism, while also attempting to improve Azerbaijan's modern image on the international stage.

The state authorities are therefore heavily engaged in defining the boundaries of the religious domain, which is seen as a matter of surveillance and control. All religious groups have to be registered; even local folk shrines are increasingly subject to control by state-sponsored clergy and the local administration. Azerbaijan does not explicitly privilege Islam in political narratives. Even Shia Islam, which was historically the *de facto* state religion and numerically the dominant faith in the country, has no special status in the modern constitution. Azerbaijan represents a specific secular constellation due to its early process of secularization that began at the end of the nineteenth century,² the radical secularization of the harsh Soviet anti-religious campaigns, industrialization and contemporary Azerbaijani national secularism. It is therefore not surprising that we observe an official discourse about a relatively low level of religiosity in Azerbaijan after socialism and a policy of suppressing new global Muslim faith communities (Bedford 2009; Balci and Goyushov 2015; Wiktor-Mach 2017). Azerbaijan is therefore striving to preserve its secular heritage, often in the name of fighting religious extremism.³

² On the anti-clerical movement at the end of the 19th century and the role of the Mulla Nasreddin journal, see Grant 2016.

³ In this sense, contemporary Azerbaijani policy is comparable with the repressive policy in Tajikistan, which is justified with reference to countering extremism and entails not only banning laws but also official efforts to create a 'proper' Islam for its national population (Lemon and Thibault 2018).

¹ Interview with Rafik Aliyev, a former ideologue of the State Committee for Working with Religious Organizations, conducted by the author in Baku, March 2019.

The centralized nature of regulations is very much linked to Soviet legacies shaping religious state policy, management style and language. The crucial institution for regulating Muslim religious life in Azerbaijan is the state-sponsored Caucasus Muslim Board (CMB), which was known until the mid-1990s as the Spiritual Board of Transcaucasian Muslims.⁴ The post-Soviet continuity of this institution in Azerbaijan is obvious: for example, the leader of the CMB has held this position since 1987. Together with the State Committee for Working with Religious Organizations (2001), the CMB is responsible for controlling, monitoring and representing Muslim issues within and outside of the country.

The transformation of religious policy has been formalized in legal amendments that foster a hierarchy among so-called 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' religious organizations. This approach has led to the unequal treatment of different religious communities and created a distinction between 'good' and 'bad' religions. In this regard, different religious communities and sacred sites have different relations with the state authorities in terms of visibility, legitimacy, the built environment and access to public structures. Traditional religious groups include local Shia and Sunni Muslim communities, the Russian Orthodox Church and Judaism. Officials in Baku use the term 'non-traditional' to identify a set of institutionalized confessions with transnational linkages and 'foreign' backgrounds. Among the communities considered by the state authorities to be non-traditional are a number of Evangelical and Charismatic Protestant Churches, including the Seventh-day Adventists and the Baptist Union, Krishnaism, new Muslim communities established after 1991, such as the Salafis and the Nurcu movement, and other minorities, including historical communities such as the Bahai faith.⁵ Thus, the Azerbaijani authorities use the

terms 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' in a political way that allows them to regard certain religious communities as potential challenges and to intervene in their practices by applying bureaucratic terminology like 'licensed' and 'unlicensed' to them.

Three main strategies can be identified in faith-state relationships in Azerbaijan. The first is restrictive control over faiths and their presence in public spaces, in particular in the case of Jehovah's Witnesses, new Muslim communities and oppositional Shia communities in rural areas. The Azerbaijani government views them as a threat to national security, as they are often thought to be under the influence of foreign powers, such as Iran and other Gulf states. As an imam at one mosque frequented by Salafis emphasized, religious issues are subordinated to urban traffic rules:

When I was driving to morning prayer, a traffic policeman stopped me and told me that I had broken the rules. He said that I was driving fast. I asked him to issue a fine, as I was in a hurry. He asked where I was hurrying to. I said that I was hurrying to pray and needed to arrive in time. He asked why it was so important to be on time. You can pray later. I cannot explain to people that if I do not come to the mosque on time, no one will be able to come and pray. So there is such a rule. Just think, the number of people participating in the morning prayer is about 600, but I cannot keep them waiting...

The second strategy involves selected restrictions on 'non-traditional faiths' such as Evangelical Churches, Krishnaism and the local Bahai faith. In 2014, an amendment to Azerbaijan's constitution prohibited the dissemination of religious literature and financial support from abroad, which affected the issue of the registration of non-traditional religious organizations by the State Committee for Working with Religious Organizations. For many non-traditional religious communities, it became difficult to obtain registration. Registration is the state's way not only of endorsing the existence of a religious community and its 'purity' in the eyes of the authorities, but also of legitimizing the community's presence

⁴ The Spiritual Board of Transcaucasian Muslims was established in 1872 by the Russian tsarist administration and relaunched in 1943 during WWII.

⁵ Interview with Agil Shirinov, vice rector of the Azerbaijan Institute for Theology, conducted in Baku in February 2019.

and visibility in physical space. The third strategy is strategic co-optation of those faith groups that can be useful for Azerbaijan's international relations, in particular Judaism, the Russian Orthodox Church and Catholicism. To advance its national and international politics, the Azerbaijani state uses these specific religious communities as additional soft power to promote good relations with regional and international partners such as Russia, Europe, Israel and the United States. For instance, as a result of the ban on foreign missionaries introduced in the 2010s, all religious leaders must be citizens of Azerbaijan. However, the Catholic and Lutheran Churches seem to be exceptions to this rule, as they have special agreements with the State Committee for Working with Religious Organizations and are allowed to invite foreign pastors from countries such as Germany and Slovakia.⁶

Azerbaijan amended its law on religious freedom significantly in 2015 and 2017. Strict re-registration requirements and bureaucratic procedures have become important instruments of state control over local and transnational Muslim religious groups (Bashirov 2018). In this way, access to Sunni and Shia mosques and the call to prayer (*azan*) has been limited during Ramadan in Baku and other major cities, and more recently during larger international events such as the European Olympic Games in summer 2015 or the Formula One championships (2016-2019). In 2015, a presidential decree ruled that religious symbols, slogans and ceremonies may only be used and performed inside places of worship, near sacred sites, or during official, state-orchestrated ceremonies.

⁶ Alongside intense state monitoring, the privileged religious communities receive a donation from the Presidential Fund. The amount is not fixed, and these communities receive far higher amounts than non-traditional groups. For example, an imam at a mosque in Azerbaijan receives a monthly state salary of about 400 manat (\$235). In 2018, fourteen imams received a gift from the state of Azerbaijani-made Khazar cars. By contrast, some Shia imams who received their education in Iran and Iraq, or religious leaders at new 'purist' Muslim communities, are not supported by state funds.

These strict requirements have meant that performing the recently revived Shia Muslim Ashura mourning ritual outside mosques is now prohibited in Azerbaijan. Instead of the symbolic collective self-flagellation ceremony held in the streets on Ashura Day, an annual day of mourning for the martyr Husayn ibn Ali, the state now only permits the enactment of Ashura rituals indoors. In addition, instead of self-flagellation, a new secularized practice – medical blood donation – has been introduced and implemented at central and larger mosques and shrines.⁷ The rule requiring worship to take place indoors or behind the walls of the church or mosque applies to other confessions and religious minorities too. For instance, public Orthodox Easter processions on the streets outside the Russian Orthodox churches have also been prohibited in Azerbaijan.

Finally, it is worth noting that recent oppressive changes to the state regulation of religious life recall the Soviet model of state-faith relations. For example, new regulations were introduced in 2015 according to which all religious buildings and prayer houses in the country are claimed as state property. The state has intervened in recent renovations carried out at mosques, churches and synagogues in Azerbaijan by installing new surveillance technologies. As one imam of a local mosque emphasized in an interview:

Inside the mosque, there are audio and video cameras installed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. There are cameras installed by the Foundation for the Promotion of Moral Values and the Caucasus Muslim Board. The mosque is monitored inside and outside 24 hours a day. And before we had these cameras, there were no attempts to provoke a conflict. A person must be able to adapt to the society in which he lives. If they don't, they will be isolated from the society.

Religious presence is ambivalent in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, where administrative regulations

⁷ A similar prioritization towards 'acceptable' and 'non-acceptable' religiosity 'good' and 'bad' forms of public expression of religion is observable in the European urban contexts. See in Martinez-Arino and Grier 2020.

can either curtail or promote particular religious expressions and configurations.

Different actors are involved in this uncertain process of restoring and rebuilding sacred sites in the post-socialist city: state authorities, city planners, official religious institutions, international organizations. In studying the religious presence and diversity of religious place-making strategies in the context of post-Soviet Azerbaijani urbanism, we have to look at grassroots religiosity and vernacular sacred sites. They emerge in a non-religious environment and are embedded in mundane urban infrastructures and ordinary residents, who also can help shape and produce religious configurations in the urban space. A number of recent studies are critical of the dichotomy that is usually drawn between the secular and religious domains in post-socialist societies, calling for the revision of the boundary between the secular and the religious. I agree that interactions between these two domains are complex and that the urban context provides good examples of their interweaving. In this context, the term 'urban-religious configuration' can be useful, referring as it does to an assemblage of material, spatial, symbolic and sensuous spaces and practices in which the religious and the secular/urban overlap and intermingle (Lanz 2018, Burchardt 2019). Like Lanz, I suggest avoiding treating the secular/religious dichotomy as involving two extreme poles with clear-cut boundaries. From this perspective, the process of religious place-making in post-Soviet Azerbaijan includes formal and informal, official and vernacular sets of religious practices and expressions aimed at the symbolic and material appropriation of the urban space.

Baku

Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, with a population of 2.3 million, is a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional city. Over the last decade, it has undergone a radical transformation, from a peripheral socialist city to a neo-liberal city and regional metropolis on the Caspian Sea. Baku developers have sought to present it to the inter-

national arena as 'the Dubai of the Caspian Sea', an oil city with luxury hotels and iconic architecture (Valiyev 2018; Guliyev 2018, Darieva 2015). In a process of urban renewal supported by the authorities, private investors and prominent architectural names such as Zaha Hadid (Aliyev Art Centre) have put a shiny new gloss on the city.

To achieve a level of globality and a ranking on the city scale, the 'worlding' (Ong 2011), Baku invested in several costly landmark projects, including renovations, the redevelopment of globally valuable places such as the airport, promenades, shopping malls and convention centres for mega events. The city is well connected to 66 international airports with (before the pandemic) non-stop flights to global cities such as London, Moscow and New York, three flights a week to Israel, and direct flights to important Shia Muslim pilgrimage sites in Iran and Iraq.⁸

However, one should bear in mind that the last two decades have also been marked by abrupt social change in the city, a rapid and traumatic wave of privatizations and inadequate development of urban policies and planning, leading to a high level of social polarization and the demolition of old neighbourhoods and historical residential zones. The rapid transformation of urban spaces in Baku has been accompanied by debates about 'frightening urbanism', as one local journalist, Vyacheslav Sapunov, reflected in an interview on the effects of aggressive beautification projects in central Baku. In many cases, these processes are associated with the bulldozer purification of urban spaces (Darieva 2015; Roth 2018; Valiyev 2018), which ordinary people experience as arbitrary change threatening everyday life and urban sociality. Recent urban reconstruction has reduced the extent of recreational public spaces such as urban parks, promenades and small green areas. Due to urbanization and neo-liberal re-development, some old mosques and shrines have had to 'make way' for

⁸ Data based on an analysis of international flight connections available on Google.

city development projects, new parks and commercial centres.

Here we can speak of a place where the Shari'ah fundamentally resided, and this is undeniable. However, the Shari'ah says that whenever a place is required to serve people, in the form of a road or public facilities, a change in the location of a mosque or a cemetery, which is also considered inviolable, can be carried out. The Shariah says that if it is necessary and for the benefit of society, then the movement of holy places is allowed, in particular, a change in the location and building of the mosque. However, in other cases, it is inviolable." [Elimlar Akademiyasi Mosque]

Religion is not the crucial element shaping the modern skylines and urban materiality of Baku. One can observe fluid forms of religiosity that are not tied to existing institutionalized arrangements around mosques and churches. Due to the Soviet past and administrative repression, religious expressions do not always take place inside mosques and churches, but can be found in alternative spaces. The question is how local vernacular Muslim practices and non-canonical faiths (re)inscribe themselves into urban spaces in the context of the restrictive top-down policy against public manifestations of religiosity.

The boneless saint's prayer house

Passengers riding on the buses and *marshrutkas* (public transportation) in Baku can see a small portrait next to the driver's seat. The person depicted is Mir Mövsum Agha (MMA) or Et-Agha, 'the boneless saint'. Bakuviens of different social and ethnic backgrounds worship MMA for his ability to heal without medication and perform miracles. For instance, they believe that the saint can protect Bakuviens from car accidents and bad luck, regardless of his apparent physical disability. This sign of the sacred in urban traffic goes back to traditional Shia folk beliefs in saint veneration as a non-canonical place of 'little' Islam and an informal prayer site. In Azerbaijan, shrines have often been seen as a rural phenomenon, and certainly many Shia shrines are located in villages or between settlements. However, within the last century they have also been increasingly



Figure 2. Image of Mir Mövsum Agha, the boneless healer. Source: Tsypylma Darieva, Baku 2016.

absorbed by the city due to urbanization, urban growth and migration.

Sacred folk sites (*pir* and *ziyarat gakh*) are usually viewed in the context of popular beliefs, which neither conflict nor merge with official mainstream religion. Indeed, they can be characterized as self-governing, and their status seems to be negotiable. Although there are no fixed legal frameworks for the operation of sacred Shia folk sites, new and larger shrines are gradually coming under state control and surveillance through different channels. One such channel is the state-sponsored supply of free gas and electricity to sacred sites.⁹

Two prominent places of worship in Baku are associated with the 'boneless saint': a larger shrine at the cemetery in Shuvelyan, close to the Caspian shore; and his former house in the Old City¹⁰ in central Baku, which was turned into

⁹ The famous Bibi-Heybat shrine in Baku, which was destroyed in the 1930s, was restored at the end of the 1990s by the former president of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev, the father of the current president.

¹⁰ Baku's Old City has undergone a massive transformation over the last twenty years. Once perceived as a place inhabited by traditional rural Azeri migrants,

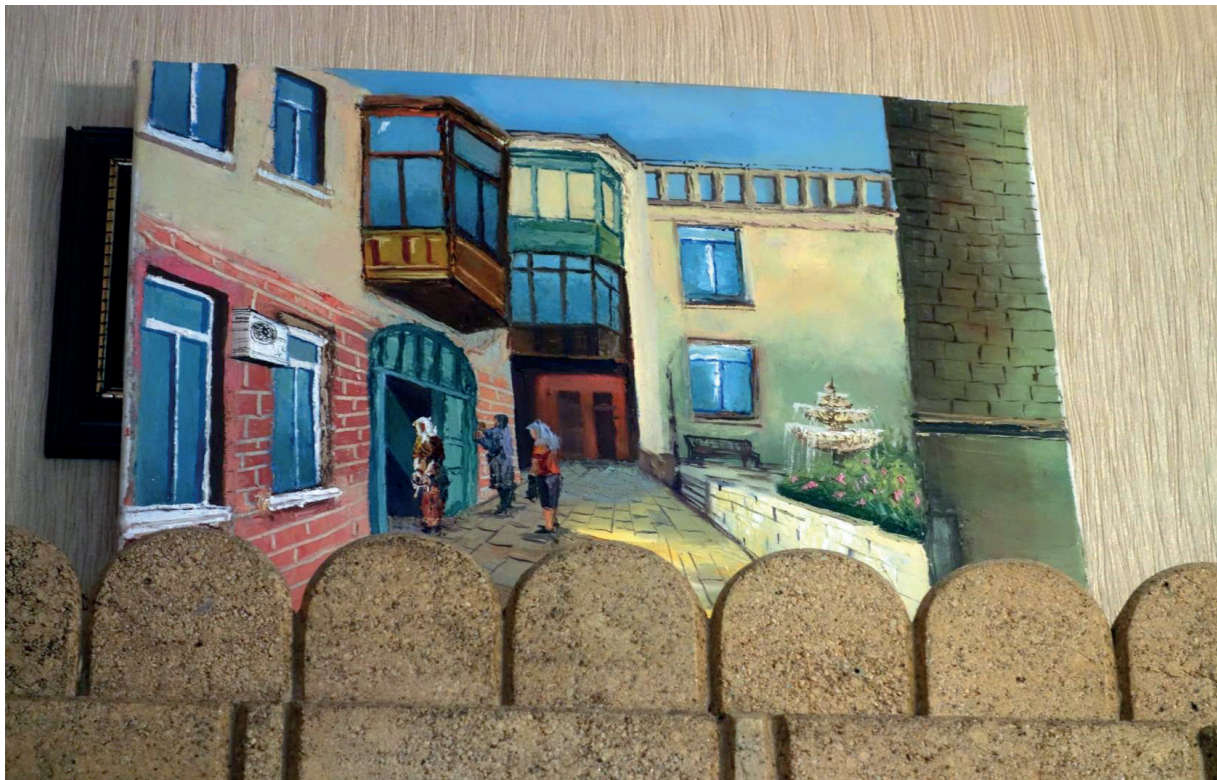


Figure 3. A painting of the healer's house in Baku, Old city. Source: Tsypylma Darieva 2016.

a pilgrimage site after WWII. In the following I focus on just one semi-private pilgrimage site in central Baku. Built at the end of the nineteenth century, Mir Mövsum Ağa house is a two-storey house in the old Baku district of İcherişəhər (İcərişəhər). The ground and first floors of the house are usually shared by both Ağa's relatives and pilgrims. The place of worship is located in a tiny room without windows decorated by a framed black and white portrait of Et-aga and his armchair covered by a cloth with writing in the Persian script. Pilgrims leave donations or *nazir* (alms in a bowl) on a small table, which a caretaker empties every twenty minutes.

The house can easily be approached from three different directions: from the old city, from the main avenue and from the main gate to the old city. Its door remains open day and night; visitors come from dawn to dusk. In my afternoon observations over the course of a week in April 2015, more than two hundred people typically visited the site in the space of two hours.

after a massive restoration and renovation campaign, was gentrified and turned into the main tourist attraction.

Their visit do not last long, about five minutes. Compared to traditional pilgrimages to larger shrines or prayers in a mosque, it is a very brief and informal activity. To draw a comparison with modern urban behaviour, such as 'fast food' and the 'take-it-to-go culture', we can call this 'fast prayer' and 'blessing-to-go'. Urbanites come to the holy place with personal desires (*niyyet*) and plans linked to people's daily life requests, from passing examinations at school and universities without having to pay *baksheesh* (a facilitating payment made to officials) via conceiving a child and having a good marriage to buying a proper house or undergoing successful surgery. Many pilgrims told me that they come to receive Ağa's *bioenergetika*, to find inner peace in the hectic city life. Individuals, families, groups of students or schoolchildren, female and male worshippers, taxi-drivers and migrants, professors and politicians, are among the visitors to Mir Movsum Ağa's shrine and the saint's house. There are no strict regulations for the choreography of prayer in İcərişəhər. In addition, there is no strict spatial separation of visitors to the shrine; male and female pilgrims use the same entrance. Visitors

come on foot or by public transportation, more rarely by car because of the traffic in central Baku.

Some Bakuvis who visit the sacred site in their city view the process of *pir* visitation as an act resembling or even replacing the grand pilgrimage (*hajj*) to the Kaaba in Mecca. It is precisely this belief and the act of venerating saints that new Muslim 'purists' claim to be incompatible with normative Sunni Islam. Sunni 'orthodox' believers increasingly denounce *ziyarat gakh* as sites of 'pagan' worship and condemn visits as an 'incorrect' form of Islam. Despite these denunciations, the popularity of saint veneration is not diminishing.

The appeal of the pilgrimage to Et-Agha's sanctuaries is universal among men and women because it is thought to help with such a wide range of problems, improving one's situation by alleviating general uncertainty, infertility, family problems, unemployment and illness in parents or children. The desire to buy an apartment or a house or to pass an exam at school or university without having to bribe officials is another motivation for people to venerate Agha's power. One Bakuvis intellectual expressed his understanding of why the majority of the pilgrims are women as follows:

Usually you can find two types of people at pirs' shrines, lucky and unlucky people, both female and male. The fact that you see more women at this place says that they are less lucky and successful in this city, as it is not so easy to hold together a job and a family. The practice of visiting Agha's house is popular among businesswomen, artists and politicians.

As the guardians of the saint's house emphasized in March 2015, 'saints do not discriminate on religious or ethnic grounds'. Associated with the Soviet past, there is an inclusive type of narrative that tells how the boneless healer was venerated by non-Muslims, in particular by Russians, Armenians and Jews during World War II. One such story revolves around an Armenian soldier who visited Agha's house before being sent to the front line and tells how MMA became his patron

and protector for the rest of his life. At Agha's funeral in 1950, it was this Armenian soldier who carried the saint's coffin on his shoulders from the door of the saint's house in İcərişəhər to the cemetery in Shuvelyan. This basic openness and inclusivity extends not only to local non-Muslims, but also to tourists, expats and foreigners living in Azerbaijan, such as Loreen, the Swedish winner of the Eurovision Song Contest in 2012, of Moroccan Bedouin background, who was the only entrant to meet local human rights activists in 2012.

It is in this way that popular Shia saint veneration practices construct flexible 'shared' spaces. Marking a significant threshold, they not only mediate a connection with the other 'divine' world, they also serve as sites where the city's secular life and urban narratives are inscribed and lived. Practitioners announce and appropriate their sites on a rather informal private level and in an 'unspectacular' manner. Caretakers maintain good relations with neighbourhood residents by organizing an annual *ehsan* feast for members of the local community and honourable guests, including members of the city administration. In the 2000s, the saint's house in Baku was actually transformed into a 'branded' urban site of worship performed in miracle stories about the saint's power to resist political regimes during the Soviet past. The key power of informal shrines lies in their openness, flexibility and material hybridity, which make possible cross-conventional frameworks and demonstrate the sharing of places of belonging.

Unlike to new, for instance Salafi Muslim communities and 'non-traditional' Protestant Christian communities, the Azerbaijani state does not place any serious restrictions on maintaining and restoring traditional *pir* shrines or *ziyarat gakh*. On the contrary, many caretakers of the larger shrines have started to receive a regular income from the state-sponsored Board of Caucasus Muslims (*Qafqaz Məsəlmanları İdarəsi*), which they do not refuse. Moreover, sacred folk sites are undergoing changes, as they are increasingly becoming subject to controls by the state and

the clergy, as well as criticism from new 'purist' Muslim communities and educated young people who regard such traditions as 'backward' and 'pagan' (Darieva 2018).

We are not 'Wahhabi', we are a Bahai community

Most research on religious diversity in Azerbaijan is focused on the rise of Muslim institutions and radical Islam practices, with fewer studies conducted on the multiple small-scale religious places and non-Muslim religious practices in Baku. There is a variety of smaller religious groups, practices and non-unified, less visible and less state-organized places of worship that function within and beyond imposed structures. A number of smaller religious communities do not maintain their own prayer houses in Baku. For instance, four Protestant communities currently rent the former German Church building *kirkha*¹¹ in central Baku, which belongs to the State Conservatory, bringing together Lutherans, Protestants, and the New Life and Vineyard Churches (see Aliyeva's paper in this special issue). These 'homeless' Christian communities apparently do not mind not having their own prayer houses or buildings. Indeed, they are proud to have a right to hold services in *Kirkha*, due to its symbolism and the validity it confers on their existence in Azerbaijan.

The Bahai religious community of Baku is rather invisible in terms of religious place-making. Bahaism is a monotheistic universalistic religion that first arose in Iran in the nineteenth century and subsequently spread all over the world. Its main temple is located in Haifa, Israel. For a country like Azerbaijan that officially follows an ideology of religious tolerance and multiculturalism, the Bahai faith might be seen as a natural fit: its practitioners recognize Mohammed, Jesus Christ, Moses, the Buddha, Krishna and Zoroaster as manifestations of one God. The

Bahais preach humanistic unity, the essential worth of human beings and the value of the traditional family across the world. The Bahai faith can be described as a syncretic religion, a combination of earlier beliefs with Shia Islamic, Christian and Buddhist roots (Smith 1987). However, Bahais view themselves as a distinct and vernacular religious tradition with their own scriptures and laws, where much emphasis is placed on the harmony between religion and science.

The Bahai community in Baku is a re-established religious group (1991) with a longer history going back to the late nineteenth century. The approximately 2,500 members of this group consider themselves the oldest Bahai community in the world. In terms of ethnic composition, the community mainly comprises ethnic Azeris, but also has Tatar, Jewish and Russian members. Most members are educated 'middle-class' urbanites speaking both Azeri and Russian, such as teachers, doctors, lawyers, engineers and technical intelligentsia, and women are in the majority (68-70%). Given the community's openness towards new members, Baku's Bahai community is growing, in particular among educated young people and students. The growth of the community depends on individual conversions. The basic structure of the community includes spiritual services on Saturdays and Sundays and during the week; active community members offer religious and broader educational classes for children. Instead of a spiritual leader (imam or priest) with responsibility for the community's morality and rituals, an elected council of nine members coordinates administrative, financial and public relations, including cultural events. As a council member responsible for public relations explained to me in May 2019: 'I am not a religious leader, I am just a member of the Baku Bahai Community Council and a professor at Baku State University.'

A distinctive feature of the religious community is its social and financial nature. The Bahai community emphasizes its financial independence: the council even refuses funds from the State Committee for Working with Religious

¹¹ The building of the German Lutheran Church is known in Baku as the 'kirkha', a slightly deviated pronunciation of the German term "Kirche" meaning 'church'.



Figure 4. A Bahai performance during a regional conference in 2014. Source: <https://news.bahai.org/community-news/regional-conferences/baku.html>

Organizations.¹² Philanthropy is accepted only from members of the congregation. To avoid any suspicion of receiving and using grants from outside Azerbaijan,¹³ Bahais in Baku attach great importance to the transparency of their finances.

We are probably the only community that has open bank accounts. That is, we do not hide the aid that comes to us. When we were buying land, our community was not as strong, and our financial resources were weak. The state knows that we write letters, bring money from abroad and solve our problems. Therefore, we are not hiding anything. We know that the state is fighting terrorism. A monitoring system identifies and prohibits any channels of illegal money coming into the country. But we still keep in touch with the outside world, and we do not hide anything; everything is open. [Chairperson, Bahai Faith Community, January 2019]

Most public religious activities take place indoors. Some gatherings are held at the community office in the Caspian Plaza business centre, while other social events take place in a larger rented apartment in central Baku near Nisami metro station. Young Bahais gather informally in small groups for an early morning prayer on a beach or in a park close to the Caspian Sea. Urban public places (hotels, offices and beaches) seem to reflect a decentralized principle of Bahai religiosity and may function as laboratories of new urban

spirituality. These spatially invisible practices are similar to the evangelical churches' home- and social network-based prayer houses and differ in this sense from Muslim, Russian Orthodox and Jewish places of worship. When asked whether prayer rooms should be created in 'profane' urban public spaces such as shopping malls, the chairperson of the community emphasized the value of the 'domestic' and 'invisible' model of religiosity:

I think worship is a personal, intimate thing. It is a sacrament between man and God. In my opinion, it should not be done in public. Sometimes, we see people praying in the middle of the street, surrounded by cars and crowds, or in a car, a place of movement or crowds of people. How many houses of worship are built in Azerbaijan, people have to go to these places to perform religious rituals. There is no need for additional expenses for these purposes. [Practitioner, Bahai Faith Community, January 2019]

Although historically Bahais belong to a local tradition going back to the middle of the nineteenth century in Iran and Azerbaijan's Nakhichevan exclave, they have been persecuted by Sunni and Shia Muslims as suspicious 'heretics'. In particular, for the early Soviet authorities, the Bahais' supposedly 'merchant', bourgeois background, alien to communism and socialist ideals, made them a target of discrimination. Under the influence of the anti-religious campaign during the Soviet period, the Azerbaijani authorities still stigmatized the Bahai faith as a 'wrong' religion with connections to Iran and thus as not 'truly' Azerbaijani. Ironically, here we can observe a rather uncritical attitude to the Soviet past on the periphery of the empire: the authorities in independent Azerbaijan remain faithful to the pre-Soviet colonial and Soviet-style practices of dividing the population into 'own' and 'other'.

For the state authorities, the greatest stumbling block to dealing with re-emerged religious plurality is their persistent conviction that ethnicity has to cohere with religious belonging, i.e. that ethnic Azerbaijanis have to be Muslim. In some cases, Bahais are accused of being under foreign influence, whether from Iran or elsewhere. As

¹² The Bahai community is one of very few religious organizations not to receive financial support from the state.

¹³ Compare with <https://www.icnl.org/resources/civic-freedom-monitor/azerbaijan>

a result, the State Committee for Working with Religious Organizations has classified Bahais in Azerbaijan as a 'non-traditional non-Muslim community'. This 'othering' principle has been criticized by one of the community's leaders, who describes the Bahai community as one of the 'traditional' religious communities in Baku (*dini icma*), comparable in status to the Russian Orthodox Church or Ashkenazi Jews in Azerbaijan.

We are all Azerbaijani, and the majority of our members are Azeris, not Russians or other nationalities, as in the case of the Georgian Bahai community. We do not differ from other Azeris in terms of nationality, language, clothes or food preferences. But participating in our summer schools and social projects is crucial for us, and in this way we differ from other teachers or lawyers in Baku, who accept everyday corruption and take money from the students. (May 2018)

While Bahai practitioners are not seen as posing a substantial threat to Azeri national cohesion, the state classifies them as a non-traditional religious organization. By contrast, the Bahai leaders consider themselves part of a vernacular and local religion:

How we can be non-traditional if the homeland of the Bahai religion is the territory of northern and southern Azerbaijan (now Iran). Even when there was a Bahai movement, 80 to 90 per cent of the representatives of that movement were Azerbaijanis. Seven of the Báb's faithful disciples were Azerbaijanis. One of the only eighteen female disciples, Tahira Gudratova, was also Azeri. The Bahai religion is a religion created in Azerbaijan and the Azerbaijani sphere. How can this religion be non-traditional? [Chairperson, Bahai Faith Community]

In an interview, the public relations manager emphasized the importance of communicating the moral principles of the Bahais to the wider public in Baku and increasing their visibility as a 'good' and loyal community. In his view, the restrictive policy of registration, a lingering stigma, and the lack of information about Bahais' spiritual and philosophical principles have led to a hostile attitude towards Bahais on the part of the state authorities and city administration. In this context, an application made to 'return' to the community the territory of the histori-

cal Bahai temple in central Baku, which was destroyed during the communist anti-religious campaign, was rejected.

We have produced a website for non-Bahai Azerbaijani to spread correct information about our faith. Many people confuse us 'Bahai' with 'Wahhabi', the fundamentalist Muslims! Even the state authorities think in this way. For instance, the land-ed property administrative centre made a mistake in their records, confusing us with Wahhabi, and we were not able to buy property. (Interview February 2019)

Despite the refusal to return the historic Bahai temple to the community, Bahais are not restricted in their religious practices. They seem to be rather flexible in their spirituality and spatiality, maintaining their religiosity without territorially fixed places of worship:

The situation is a little different now. For example, our centre on Nizami will probably be demolished in about three to four years. The city-planning and architectural regulations stipulate that residents of demolished homes will be provided with new space in constructed buildings in the same location. Currently, the centre is housed in a room with an area of 250 m². If they demolish that house and build a new one, we are sure the state will give us the space. Moving or renovating is not a problem for us. We are not tied to any space. [Chairperson, Bahai Faith Community]

Places of worship for religious minorities in Baku therefore do not have a permanent existence. Religious gatherings happen in places that are not necessarily strictly confined to 'religious use'. They are defined by practitioners as secular and profane (a hotel or an office), and at the same time used temporarily as alternative spaces for sacredness. As Bahais gather in private rented houses or apartments in central Baku, their religious group can be characterized as a form of fluid urban spirituality with its invisible pragmatism, strong sense of sociability and explicitly critical attitudes towards corruption, unemployment, capitalist ideology and the growing individualism in Azerbaijan. Addressing poverty and the value of education, Bahais cooperate with the Krishna community, smaller Christian communities and secular NGOs. It seems that Bahais are

empowered by an alternative 'urban spirituality', negotiating a sociability that state institutions and elites are no longer able or willing to fulfil.

Conclusion

Azerbaijan offers fruitful arenas for the study of the dynamics of religious pluralization in urban spaces and the ways practitioners appropriate their places in those domains in which religion is seen as a source of national heritage or as a threat, and where legal frameworks (i.e. the laws on religious freedom) are constantly changing. This does not happen without fostering hierarchical relations between different religious communities and the state. While national laws and the recent restrictive state policy towards faith groups claim to be a source of religious regulation and of the tolerance of diversity, the urban locality 'on the ground' produces its own mode of religiosity in public spaces. In this paper, I have addressed these small-scale and less institutionalized religious practices as part of religious pluralization that is not necessarily anchored in the state-orchestrated religious infrastructure. As a big city, Baku provides a laboratory of emerging 'multiple moralities' where closure and openness depend strongly on state-sponsored infrastructure, but can also unfold in hybrid, alternative and more flexible modes ways of religiosity.

By exploring Azerbaijani dispositions between the limits and potentials for religious plurality, it becomes clear that although informal and non-traditional religious actors have limited access to state-sponsored infrastructures, they appropriate their own places for prayer. The limits of the public presence of religion do not mean that religiosity is being entirely pushed into private spaces again, as it was during the Soviet period.

With regard to frameworks for state regulations imposed from above, I have described two cases of a less institutionalized religious presence in Baku that are shaped by informality and sociability fostered by ordinary urbanites. Here, religious practices may represent both informality and resistance. New mechanisms creating semi-private and alternative spaces may emerge

in line with a critique of oppressive forms of state authority around the neo-liberal economy, corruption and urban renewal. In this case, profane spaces are temporarily infused with citizens' piety. This ambivalence is not always visible and can take fluid forms, but it is central to the resilience of urban-religious configurations and to navigating multiple moralities.

While the state authorities attempt to promote a new national model for being a 'good' Muslim, at the same time we observe the rise of grassroots sacred sites and those practices of prayer that exist without maintaining their own religious edifices. The insights into two selected urban-religious configurations, one located in a private house, the other in an office building, shed light on a less visible dynamic of religious place-making in Azerbaijan, which can be described as a strategy of sharing a place. The restrained visibility of the Shia folk shrine and the invisibility of Bahai practitioners become part of the mundane use of urban and residential spaces and tactics for maintaining a presence in the city that goes beyond the state-sponsored monumentality.

By sharing space with non-religious actors and relying on mundane urban structures, religious practitioners use a variety of urban spaces on a temporary basis. In this way, invisible prayers and the sense of folk piety provide what can be described as their own 'freedom', as well as alternative opportunities for suppressed expressions of urban religiosity in post-Soviet Azerbaijan.

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Representations of Religious Plurality in the Urban Space of Post-Socialist Rustavi*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the urban environment and topography of the religious architecture of the city of Rustavi, which establishes a new hierarchy and order in the former workers' city. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a sharp transformation in religiosity across the country, largely due to the construction of new religious sites, the restoration of old buildings and the rebuilding of various sites of worship. Another layer that was revealed after the collapse of the Soviet system was the emergence of new religious groups that competed fiercely and that actively began seeking their place in the post-atheist, post-secular space. The scarcity of resistance to co-existence and the search for forms of it are controversial in the urban setting, where religious symbols, in addition to their sacred significance, possess national and political meanings. Based on my ethnographic fieldwork, I examine different spatial practices and interpretations that frame the co-existence of the mainstream Georgian Orthodox Church, Georgian Catholics and the Muslim community in Rustavi. I argue that the struggle for religious spaces blends with the city's genesis in the Soviet period, which involved reviving the historic city and endowing it with an international, industrial profile. These two contradictory faces of the city, both created by the communists, are present in religious forms today and enable the search for new identities.

Keywords: Georgia, the city of forty brothers, religious pluralism, religious minority, urban space, diversity, public religiosity, post-socialist Rustavi, national narratives

Introduction

Giga Lortkipanidze¹ once said, 'We have established a theatre, what is a city without a theatre?! But a city cannot be real without a church either! Yes, we all felt it, but we were silent' giga lortkipanidzem ertkhel tkva, teat'ri k'i davaarset, is ra kalakia, sadats teat'ri araa! magram arts isaa namdvii kalaki, sadac ek'lesia araa! diakh, chven q'vela vgrdznobdit amas, magram ga-chumebuli viq'avit.' (Mumladze 1991: 5)

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¹ Founder of the Rustavi Drama Theatre, together with a group of young artists, Lortkipanidze moved to Rustavi from the Kote Marjanishvili Theatre in Tbilisi. Because of a conflict with the older generation of artists, this event was considered a kind of revolutionary step in Georgian cultural life.

Socialist Rustavi was designed as an exemplary city of workers, with no place for sacred sites or religion.² The communists found a meaningful place for the city, built in an empty space, in the history of Georgia. Soviet urban narratives placed Rustavi at the centre of medieval events in Georgia's history and turned it into a source of Georgian Soviet nationalism. The connection of the twelfth-century poet Shota Rustaveli with Rustavi became a guarantee of its national signif-

² It has been argued that in the Soviet Union communism and "Scientific Marxism" assumed the form of a sort of religion (see Dragadze 1993). However, my engagement with the term "religion" is more conventional and does not aim to analyse the religious-like nature of the Soviet Union's communist ideology.

icance. At the same time, the multinational population of Rustavi provided a heavy industrial and socialist profile for the city. Those of the city's national and international images that were suggested by the communists became the basis of opportunities for Rustavians to contemplate building or restoring a church in the city before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Finding a place for churches and crosses in the urban planning of contemporary Rustavi was not difficult. The emergence of Orthodox symbols in the streets and their perceptions are directly linked to interpretations of the city's national narrative, which can be conceptualized as rebuilding, restoring or reviving its lost historical realities. Other religious confessions found themselves in different circumstances. Their representation in the urban environment of the city faced certain obstacles, as their experience was not connected with the city's historical past. The necessarily mono-religious nature of medieval Rustavi, the revival narrative of which has become even more relevant since the post-socialist period, was its main source of identity. Historical understanding and experience of the plurality of religions and their co-existence simply did not exist (Lomtadze 1975).

Prominent religious groups in the post-Soviet period were primarily perceived as a threat to religious unity. Rustavi, the economic and social profile of which is linked to the Soviet system, had to prove its significance to Georgian society generally in the post-socialist era. The main method in this case was the construction of Orthodox churches and demonstrations of religiosity. To achieve this, the Orthodox churches commonly resorted to publicity. Members of other religious groups, conversely, found it very difficult to find a place in the city, despite their large experience of multi-ethnic communities and multiculturalism in the recent past, in line with Rustavi being named the City of Forty Brothers and the City of Brotherhood (Kamushadze 2017).³ In the new

reality, the challenges posed by religious groups are seen in the controversy surrounding the construction of a Catholic church, which, along with legal barriers, also exposed public intolerance. The fact that the construction of a Catholic church near a public school was perceived as a social threat by the majority of the population also indicates non-recognition of this category of church. Obtaining a permit for its construction became possible only after the proposed location was changed (50-year-old man, 2020).⁴ The visibility of the city's Muslim community has also been an insurmountable challenge, leading to its failure to build a Muslim shrine in Rustavi (24-year-old woman, 2019). For other religious groups, the main challenge is still to establish themselves in the city space and to enjoy some form of visibility. As the city's chief architect explained to me in a private conversation, the only consent granted for the construction of a religious building was in response to the request of the Catholic church. As for non-Orthodox religious buildings owned by other denominations, they were built for other purposes and were then transferred or sold to the representatives of various religious groups. However, any attempt to display religious symbols on buildings provokes protests from the Orthodox population (Architect, 2020). Consequently, the process of their establishment in the urban space is still controversial in Rustavi, permitting different interpretations of the multicultural nature of the city.

The issue of religious diversity in Rustavi is related to the city's ethnic composition. In the

tively trying to replicate and popularize. It is difficult and even impossible to talk about how Rustavi came to be known as the City of Forty Brothers, but the goal is easy to grasp: to create an image for the city as multiethnic and multicultural. The names of the city's streets and squares can also be used as an example to express the friendship between nations and peoples. The mass migration of non-Georgians from Rustavi took place in the 1990s, dramatically changing its ethnic composition.

⁴ All interviewers and interlocutors are representatives of different religious groups living in Rustavi or were involved in the construction of religious buildings in the city.

³ The City of Forty Brothers became one of Rustavi's brand names, which the communist regime was ac-

post-Soviet period, this City of Forty Brothers, which was declared a symbol of multiethnic communities and multiculturalism across the country, became a less than convincing Soviet metaphor. According to the 2014 census data, the vast majority of the city's population is Georgian (92%), while 4% are Azeris, followed by Armenians and Russians. In addition, the list includes Ossetians, Ukrainians, Kists, Greeks and Assyrians (Geostat 2014). The three cases of religious establishments in the city discussed in this article concern Georgian Orthodox Christians, Georgian Latin Catholics and Georgia's Azeri Muslim community. By presenting these three cases, I would like to show that ethnic markers play a role in the representation of these groups' religiosity.

This article discusses the construction of the first Orthodox and therefore first Christian church in Rustavi, which started in the late socialist period. In addition, the article discusses the growing interest in the construction of Orthodox churches in post-Soviet Rustavi and what provoked the process, as well as the importance and role of the Orthodox Church in the urban space of Rustavi more generally. The article also examines what the churches were called and describes the history of those that have already been built or are currently under construction. All of this is inherent in the texture of Rustavi's urban narratives. The city's so-called 'yard chapels,' built and funded by neighbourhoods, are also noteworthy in this respect. What is the function of these chapels? How do these issues relate to Rustavi's national narrative? I also examine why the international nature of the city was not reflected in its religious plurality. Why is it difficult and sometimes impossible to establish an urban space for some confessions? In this context, the question arises as to why, for five years, Catholic Christians were not allowed to build a church on their own land in Rustavi? What was the basis of this dispute? It is also important to understand which religious groups managed to establish themselves in the urban space of Rustavi and how. The issue of the Muslim community is also

noteworthy. Why does this religion lack sites of its own in Rustavi?

Analysing Religious Plurality in Rustavi

Ethnic Georgians, Rustavi's majority population, are predominantly Orthodox Christian. This is reflected not only in the construction of Orthodox churches in the city but also in the marking of public spaces like so-called yard chapels with other kinds of religious symbols. As noted by Silvia Serrano, in the process of State building, the Orthodox Church in Georgia is actively demarcating territories, interpreting the country's past and claiming cultural heritage. Weak state institutions, impoverished political actors and high public trust in the Orthodox Church give the Orthodox clergy a great opportunity to interpret what being a Georgian means (Serrano 2010). The close connection between Georgia and Orthodoxy is also described by Mathijs Pelkmans, who observed the process of the population's conversion from Islam to Christianity in Adjara, which his interlocutors saw as a way of going back to the roots (Pelkmans 2002). It can be argued that Rustavi is no exception regarding the position of the Orthodox Church. Indeed, my Georgian Catholic interlocutors made observations similar to Pelkmans's and described their conversion to Orthodoxy as a way of returning to the roots, as they considered Orthodox Christianity an integral part of being Georgian.

Although religions largely originate and spread in cities, it took a long time to recognize their importance in the urban context (Casanova 2013). The revision of concepts related to secularization is also a part of this process. According to the theory of secularization, with the growth of modernity the importance of religion should decline. Developments in the world over the past few decades, including in cities, have revealed a different reality, which has led to the need for a corresponding interpretation and reformulation of theoretical models of secularization. Recognizing 'multiple modernity', Peter Berger put forward his own vision of the current situation of religious pluralism and its twofold understanding

as first, the co-existence of religious and secular institutions, and second, the existence of common shared spaces for different religious world views (Berger 2014). Berger's understanding of religious pluralism fully reflects the reality in Georgia, especially in Rustavi, which also hints at the possibility of conflict in the urban space and the need to create mechanisms to respond to it. In the Document of Strategic Development issued by the State Agency for Religious Affairs of Georgia, the concept of pluralism refers to two situations: first, to the prevention of religious conflict, which is detrimental to pluralism; and second, to the religious minorities that are a vital part of Georgia's pluralistic society and that contribute to community diversity. In both cases, pluralism is seen as something that needs to be protected (State Agency for Religious Issues 2015). Religious diversity in cities does increase the possibility of conflict, but urban society cannot live in constant conflict. Thus, mechanisms of avoiding, managing and resolving the conflict should be developed in the relevant environment (Berking et al. 2018: 7).

The situation in Rustavi reflects the relationship between religious groups and state institutions, the coexistence and balance of which have so far largely been achieved at the expense of the interests of minorities, which offer different interpretations of religious pluralism at the formal, political and public levels. To discuss the peculiarities of religious competition and religious pluralism in Rustavi, I have chosen the urban space of the city and an expression of religiosity—religious architecture—that creates a discourse of symbolic power with visual characteristics:

'Objects become icons when they have not only material force but also symbolic power. Actors have iconic consciousness when they experience material objects, not only understanding them cognitively or evaluating them morally but also feeling their sensual, aesthetic force.' (Knott et al. 2016: 128)

Interest in religious buildings is triggered not only by their salient form and content, but also

by their perceptual features, which, together with new practices, create the tools for forming identities and fighting for power. Religious objects become icons that establish a new order and hierarchy in the city. The hierarchy between religious groups is also indicated in their distribution in the urban space. It should be noted that the centre, including from the religious point of view, is New Rustavi, which is more densely populated and separated from Old Rustavi by the Mtkvari River, its construction beginning in the late socialist period, and more specifically in the 1970s. The importance of location in general is further indicated by the fact that the Latin Catholics failed in their attempt to build a church in the city centre. Permission was only granted after the Catholic church changed its location to periphery in New Rustavi. An attempt by Muslims to build a shrine linked to New Rustavi also failed. Interest in New Rustavi is also triggered by the city's general environmental situation, as most of the factories are concentrated in Old Rustavi. As New Rustavi is more socially active and has had a better infrastructure since the late Soviet period, this part of the city also provides a new opportunity to increase one's visibility.

To discuss the place and importance of religion in society during the communist era, Dragadze suggested the term 'domestication', which refers not to the disappearance of religion but to its shift from public to private, which also involves their simplification. Thus, now, because of this simplicity, they involved more people, especially when faced with illness or life crises. The post-Soviet refashioning of religious life, as Dragadze suggested, can be seen as a way of escaping from communist colonial structures (Dragadze 1993).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a sharp transformation in religiosity was evident across the country. One of the most noticeable effects of the ending of the communist era was the new religious sites that mushroomed across the country, as well as the old places of worship that were restored and rebuilt. The urban environment of the city became a popular space for demonstrating religiosity. Another reality after the collapse

of the Soviet system was the emergence of new, diverse religious groups competing fiercely and beginning to actively seek their place in the new post-atheist and post-secular space. In Rustavi, we find a Muslim community, a group of Latin Catholic believers, the Lutheran Church, a Pentecostal Chapel, a Baptist-Evangelical community and the Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses, alongside people of other faiths who have not made any claims about their visibility in the city space. In the article, I will only discuss the construction of Orthodox Christian churches in Rustavi, the case of the establishment of Latin Catholics in the city, whose efforts, despite a long resistance, were successful (Loladze 2018), and the Muslim community and its struggles to find a site in the city for their rituals and other religious practices, which has so far proved impossible. It is noteworthy that the last two cases are religious groups that are classified in Georgia as 'traditional' (Khutsishvili 2004), despite which it has been difficult for them to establish themselves in Rustavi's urban environment. The scarcity of, resistance to and search for forms of coexistence are interesting in an urban setting where religious symbols, as well as having sacred significance, possess national and political meanings. It is possible to consider the religious architecture of Rustavi as an example of the embodiment of national and political ideas.

'Qualities of architecture that do not simply represent something that already exists but that help make and destroy identities, enable and disrupt experience, create, reproduce or break up communities – in short, that makes a change.' (Verkaaik 2011: 13)

The arrangement of post-socialist spaces in Georgia reflects all the painful processes in Georgian society that are related to the understanding and interpretation of the Soviet heritage. In her article 'Sharing the not-sacred', Silvia Serrano discusses the Rabat⁵ construction project in Akhaltsikhe,

the importance of which goes beyond just the restoration of a historical monument. Of particular importance is the fact that the complex includes various cultural and religious buildings. Serrano views the restoration of the complex as an attempt by the Saakashvili government to compete with the attempt of the Georgian Orthodox Church to mark the entire territory of the country and its cultural heritage. According to Serrano, the fact that the construction of Rabat was a political project is also reflected in the circumstance that it was not headed by the Ministry of Culture and Monument Protection of Georgia, but by the then Minister of Internal Affairs, who was originally from the region and had been born into a Catholic family. According to Serrano, the future of Rabat and how it will serve the image of the country's multiculturalism is still unclear. To turn Rabat into a shared space, it became necessary to desacralize the public space by transforming the existing religious buildings into museums (Serrano 2018).

Rustavi's urban environment and the topography of the religious architecture in the city accurately reflect the contrast between two images of the city, one national, the other international, that deepened after the collapse of the Soviet atheist and secular order and which still continues. The struggle for religious spaces blends with the Soviet genesis of the city, which represents the revival of the historic city with a multicultural, industrial profile. These two contradictory images of the city created by the communists are present in religious forms today and assume the character of a search for new identities. After all, the process of constructing religious buildings and struggling to settle in the urban space may constitute other reflections of the recent past and different interpretations of religious pluralism.

can observe layers of different cultural heritage down the centuries: an Orthodox Christian church, traces of Latin Catholics, a mosque, a Jewish neighbourhood etc. In 2011-2012 Rabat was restored by Saakashvili's government and was presented as evidence of a tradition of tolerance and of the peaceful coexistence of different cultures.

⁵ Rabat is a medieval fortress that was built in the ninth century and became a main residence in the region in the twelfth century. It is located in the southern part of Georgia in Akhaltsikhe, where we

The data for this study were collected during my fieldwork in Rustavi between 2019 and 2020, but they also draw on my earlier research in the city. As my main methods, I have used participant observation and interviewing. I have also used content analysis to analyse various secondary sources. Drawing on my field data, this article addresses the issue of religious plurality as a post-socialist reality in a local context in which the formal and factual understandings of the event are dissimilar.

Construction of the First Church in Rustavi: Instrumentalization of the City's History

The construction of the first church in post-Soviet Rustavi was a special event, one that went beyond the local context and became significant for post-Soviet Georgia. It is believed the first church to be built in any post-socialist country after the collapse of the Soviet Union was in Rustavi. Currently, there are about 23 active Orthodox churches in Rustavi, and ten more are under construction.⁶ They occupy a prominent place in the urban space and can be found in a number of advertisements and publications concerning the city. The erection of crosses is also noteworthy, a trend that began when the mayor of the city, Merab Tkeshelashvili, erected an iron cross on Mount Yalghuji, overlooking Rustavi (see Figure 1). This was followed by the erection of iron crosses in yards across the city.⁷ Rustavi has three distinguished Orthodox churches: Rustavi Sioni, the Church of the Annunciation and the Cathedral. Rustavi Cathedral is distinguished by its magnificence and is named after the Georgian King Vakhtang Gorgasali.⁸ The name of this warrior king has a special significance for Rustavi, as it provides a wide range of opportunities for national interpretations of the

city's distant and recent past. The first church in Rustavi, the Church of the Annunciation, is distinguished by its symbolism and is believed to have been built on the ruins of another church. The Church of the Annunciation is also connected to King Vakhtang Gorgasali, as it dates back to the fifth century. Demonstrating the importance of building the first cathedral in Rustavi is a huge responsibility for the city's community. Its importance is emphasised by both priests in Rustavi and members of the community.



Figure 1. Yalghuji Mountain, Photo by Tea Kamushadze.

Rustavi Sioni occupies a prominent place in the urban space of the city, both visually and in its content, reflecting the process of its construction. Rustavi Sioni is located in the centre of New Rustavi and is characterized by its many parishioners. On holidays the church cannot accommodate everyone, and most of the congregation joins in the liturgy in the courtyard (see Figure 2).

'When His Holiness Ilia II visited Rustavi Sioni, he mentioned four times in his sermon:

'I've seen a miracle' ...

'rodesats uts'mindesma ilia II-m rustavis sioni moikhila, kadagebashi 4-jer ts'armotkva:

'me vnahe saotsreba'' (Subeliani 2013).

This narrative relates to the technology of Rustavi Sioni's construction and the symbolism of its historical importance. The church was built utilizing traditional technologies of stone and mortar without cement or other reinforcement. As mentioned by the chief architect, Father Besarion, it was very much a matter of not losing time and of

⁶ Official website of the Patriarchate of Georgia: <https://patriarchate.ge/news/1608>

⁷ Merab Tkeshelashvili, Mayor of Rustavi between 1996-2005.

⁸ Vakhtang Gorgasali, a great warrior Georgian King of Kartli from the fifth century, and known as one of the founders of Tbilisi.

restoring the centuries-old Georgian tradition of temple building.

The construction of Rustavi Sioni took almost ten years, as architects and builders had to study old building materials and their preparation. In addition to the materials and technology, ornamental fragments and reliefs from many famous Georgian architectural monuments were used in the temple's decoration. Rustavi Sioni shows an eclectic fusion of different forms of Georgian traditional architecture, uniting the style and forms of many famous church monuments. Therefore, Rustavi Sioni, through its combination of all the outstanding forms of traditional church architecture, became an example of history-making in a history-seeking city.⁹



Figure 2. Rustavis Sioni, Photo by Tea Kamushadze.

Karpe Mumladze, the Chairman of the Writers' Union of Rustavi in the Soviet period, dedicated the work 'God is With Us' ('chventan arshghmert') to the construction of the first church in Rustavi. The book's introduction reads:

⁹ Sioni Cathedral won a Grand Prix and Gold Medal at the World Architecture Exhibition in Sofia 2012 as the best example of "tradition and innovation" (Maghlakelidze 2017).

'The book tells the story of a pious man and the restoration of a church in Rustavi after a 724-year interval.'

'ts'igni mogvitkhrobs ghvtismosavi adamanisa da 724-tslovani tsq'vet'ilobis shemdeg rustavshi mghvdelmsakhurebis aghdgenis shesakheb.'

(Mumladze 1991: 7)

The important detail is that generally, somewhat similarly to Hobsbawm's (1993) 'invention of tradition', when a new site of Orthodox worship is built or opened, it is represented as a 'restoration' (*aghddgena*) of something old and historic. This book, published at its author's expense, is loaded with emotional elements, starting with its title and ending with the dedication to his late spouse. The unusual text proposed by the author resembles the confession of a communist who has experienced a catharsis. In the introduction, he apologises to the reader for anything he may have said or understood wrongly, hoping that, if he sins when talking about 'God and the Virgin', he will be forgiven. The author's reflections on the period from 1987 to 1990 are developed interestingly in the text. He speaks of himself as a former communist, who, like other communists, could not dream of a church whose religiosity was hidden from the public space. However, he says that a suitable time has come, that the situation has changed and that something new has begun that has led people to restore the temple of Christ. According to him, everything started with the founding of the Rustaveli Society of Georgia. Of course, his mentioning of the poet Shota Rustaveli in the context of this new era cannot be accidental.

'A new age, a new situation, an era of transformation again demanded the existence of the Rustaveli Society, but with a new program.'

'da ai, akhla drom, akhalma vitarebam, gardakmnis epokam isev moitkhova rustavelis sazogadoeba, magram akhali ts'esdeba-programit.' (Mumladze 1991:6)

The creation of the Rustaveli Society, while the Soviet Union still existed, was supported by the argument that the Communist Party could not respond to the demands of the public because of its narrow-mindedness. The author then speaks

of Georgia and the crucifixion of Christ as denoting the same thing: the Cross saved Georgia and will also save it in the future. In his view, although there were no churches in Rustavi in Soviet times, its church ruins always reminded people of their presence, especially during the construction of New Rustavi. What this refers to is the ruins of many churches found by archaeologists during excavations. The communists, according to him, knew about these church ruins, but remained silent about them.

Their silence in this respect was broken by activities initiated by the Rustaveli Society in 1988. The construction of a church in Rustavi was seen as restoring the city's historical and cultural monuments. In addition to this, the building had been initiated by factory workers. The author of the book, who was actively involved in this process, tells the reader about the steps that were taken to reach the desired conclusion. These processes mainly took place in 1988-1989 and were attended by His Holiness Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia Ilia II. Finally, an archaeological justification was provided for the construction of the first church in Rustavi. This meant that it would be restored and not constructed on the same spot as the original church. It is worth noting that the initiative concerning the construction of a church in the city was connected to the restoration of the temple built by King Vakhtang Gorgasali of Kartli. Thus, the history of the construction of this church in the city of socialist workers is also interestingly related to the communists' narrative of rebuilding the historic city, whereas in fact this project was realized through the work of the Rustaveli Society.¹⁰

The Church of the Annunciation was built on the ruins of Vakhtang Gorgasali Orthodox church, which symbolized its origins and transformed it into a building with a venerable new age. This transferred religion into the public space.

¹⁰ In an interview with me, Lasha Khetsuria, Rustavi resident, claimed that in 1988 he and his friends initiated the building the first Christian church in Rustavi, but it appears that their petition and signatures have been ignored more recently (2021).

However, the historical existence of Orthodox churches have prompted the appearance of other religious groups. The multicultural atmosphere of the City of Forty Brothers was expected to become the basis for religious pluralism. However, we rarely come across this type of instrumentalization of the city's narrative, especially with respect to the process of building Orthodox Christian churches, which began before the collapse of the Soviet Union, continues today and occupies a prominent place in the city's architecture.



Figure 3. Yard chapel in Rustavi, Photo by Tea Kamushadze.

Added to this is the tendency to build massive Christian chapels in the yards of Rustavi apartment buildings, indicating a desire by the Christian population to dominate and occupy a higher place in their public hierarchy. The yard chapels best express the iconography and symbolism of religion. They are organized with contributions from the neighbourhood's residents through private initiatives, and their construction is often spontaneous. Their size and shape depend on the capabilities and vision of different neighbourhood cooperatives. They conform to no sin-

gle established style or standard. Some of them resemble a church model, in some places there is an icon with a small shrine and a candlestick, and most often people put up metal crosses and surround them with fences, decorative hedges or other plants. The yard chapel is considered the property of the neighbourhood and serves as its guardian. In addition to protection, yard chapels have acquired prestige (22-year-old woman). From the functional point of view, these churches are merely aesthetic: no specific ritual practices are involved. It is noteworthy that yard chapels with this background have become a phenomenon specific to Rustavi and are practically rarely found in other cities. They can be seen as an instrument in the fight for public space and as a peculiar manifestation of the new order and hierarchy that is dominated by Orthodox Christians.

Construction of the Catholic Church in Rustavi

Georgia has had an active relationship with the Vatican from the early days of Christianity in the country and throughout its history (Ghaghanidze 2008). Most Georgian kings established direct contact with the Pope. Letters depicting this relationship and union date back to the thirteenth century, from which period we can talk about the existence of the Catholic Church in Georgia (Ghaghanidze 2008). Italian and French Catholic missionaries only arrived in Georgia in the seventeenth century. Their influence is indicated by the reference to Georgian Catholics in the Akhaltsikhe district of Georgia as 'French'. Georgian Catholics have played a special role in the region's educational and charitable activities. Their aspirations for and contributions to the rapprochement between Georgia and Europe are also noteworthy. This religious community was severely affected during the Soviet era. Out of sixty Catholic churches in Georgia, only one functioned during the Soviet era (in Tbilisi). Today there are approximately 50,000 Catholics in Georgia. Apart from Tbilisi, Catholics are mainly represented in southern Georgia, including those who settled in Rustavi at different stages of the city's development. The number and importance

of Catholic Meskhetians¹¹ in Rustavi may be indicated by the possible existence of a Catholic neighbourhood. As one of my Catholic interlocutors, a 54-year-old man, told me, a small number of devout Catholics travelled to Tbilisi to attend religious services during the Soviet era. At that time the visibility and mobilization of Georgian Catholics was scarcely possible, and given their ethnicity, the claim on religiosity was seldom expressed in the era of Soviet atheism. This indicates that Georgian Catholics had acquired a special position in the multiculturalism of Rustavi.

Rustavi was described in Soviet-era newspapers as a city of brotherhood, friendship, youth and forty brothers (Giorgadze 1978: 3). It is difficult to determine what specific statistics formed the basis for declaring Rustavi a City of Peoples' Friendship, but Communist Party officials spared no effort to portray Rustavi as a multicultural city. The main avenue in Rustavi was called the Peoples' Friendship Avenue, and there was also a Peoples' Friendship Square, while several other streets were named after Soviet cities famous for metallurgy, like Donetsk, Sumgait or Cherkasy. In the post-Soviet period, this was preceded by the emergence of a strong nationalist movement and the mass emigration from the city of ethnic minorities to other parts of the country and abroad. The city's multiculturalism therefore lost its relevance. In some cases, however, it was instrumentalized by the local government, for example, when a statue of Heydar Aliyev¹² was erected in the city. For certain community groups and other civil-society organizations, the topic of multiculturalism has been used as a resource to argue for the need to include minorities. The importance of multiculturalism as a value shared at the state level is indicated by the goals of the Georgian national curriculum, namely to impart knowledge and teach students based on these values (National Curriculum 2018-2024).

¹¹ Georgian ethnographic groups living in southern Georgia are called Meskhetians, Meskheti being one of Georgia's historical provinces.

¹² President of Azerbaijan from October 1993 to October 2003.

Although mentioning Rustavi as a multiethnic and multicultural city is not usual in modern Georgian society, there are some exceptions, for example, a school textbook provided as a supplementary resource for schools: 'How We Lived Together in Twentieth-Century Georgia' ('rogor vtskhovrobdit ertad XX saukuneshi'). The work was written by its authors as part of the project 'Building Tolerance through History Teaching in Georgia' and presents Rustavi as an exceptionally positive example of a diverse, multicultural community. The chapter entitled 'Rustavi: The City of Forty Brothers' provides specific examples of the peaceful coexistence of different nationalities (Chikviladze 2012). This project was run by a Georgian NGO, the History Teachers' Association of Georgia, in cooperation with the Council of Europe. This case is, of course, an illustration of how history may be exploited to select facts from the past when there is a demand for certain values. However, as my ethnographic observations and interviews reveal, this demand comes not from the public, but from the government. It is also noteworthy that the government's interest in these topics and their actualization is 'dictated' to some extent by international partners such as the EU. Western partners tend to have less knowledge of the local context and urge the country and its authorities to share their 'contemporary' views, which implies the sharing and appreciation of diversity, multiculturalism and tolerance as particular values. The fact that diversity is perceived as a threat rather than a value in the context of Rustavi is confirmed by one particular high-profile dispute that later moved from public debate into the courts. This was a lawsuit filed in Rustavi City Court by the Latin Catholic Apostolic Administration against Rustavi Municipality for blocking the construction of a Catholic church in the city (Tabula 2015).

One indicator of the controversy and importance of this issue is the decision of Rustavi Catholics on 7 December 2015, to erect a so-called 'Door of Mercy' on the spot they planned to build a church in the central part of New Rustavi (State Agency for Religious Issues 2015). The

unusual sight of the Door standing out in the open mirrored the unresolved situation. The Head of the State Agency of Religious Issues of Georgia visited the site and participated in the event to show the state's neutral position regarding the construction of a Catholic church in Rustavi.

The accounts of Rustavi Catholics that I present below demonstrate the different social, political and cultural dimensions of both the process of the construction of the Catholic church and the general context of the relationship between the local Catholic population and the city's Orthodox residents.

Leila, 62, a Catholic, came from one of the villages in Adigeni district, southern Georgia, to Rustavi, where she married an Orthodox Christian. She recalled that during the communist era they prayed at home every Friday. Her grandfather had played a particular role in cultivating religiosity in Leila and her siblings. When they grew older and were students, they became parishioners at St. Peter and Paul Church in Tbilisi. In the post-Soviet period, when it came to receiving the sacrament and having a church wedding, they had to make a decision: as she did not want to give up her Catholic religion, the Orthodox Church would not marry them. Here, she noted the generosity of her husband, who agreed to be wed in the Catholic tradition. In this way, her husband did not need to change his religion and remained Orthodox.

Half of Leila's family is Orthodox, half is Catholic, her eldest son is a Catholic, and his daughter-in-law is Orthodox. Her religion does not prevent her from lighting a candle in the Orthodox Church. She has a good relationship with an Orthodox priest and her Orthodox neighbours. However, she has received offers to convert to Orthodoxy many times, which seems unacceptable for her. She recalled a period when they were not allowed to build a Catholic church in Rustavi. She discussed this issue from the political angle and recalled the pre-election period in 2012, when one of the parliamentary candidates from the opposition came to her neighbourhood



Figure 4. Catholics in Rustavi, Photo by *Tea Kamushadze*.

to meet prospective voters. As Leila remembered, the candidate told the population that the government had sold the land to Catholics for the construction of a church, information he represented as a negative act and treason. This made Leila very sad: how come she was 'different?!' Weren't the Catholics also the children of this culture and land?! She also recalled the day the Catholic church was opened in Rustavi, when the mayor repeatedly apologized for opposing its construction. According to Leila, the mayor of the city did not have a proper idea of who the Catholics were.

Father Zurab, the pastor of the Rustavi Catholic Church, whom I have met in Rustavi, talked about the pressure that the Catholic community is experiencing in Georgia. Father Zurab, like Leila, is from southern Georgia and has been serving in Rustavi for less than a year. He was surprised and could not explain the opposition that his community faces in Georgia. He found it difficult to identify where this pressure on the Catholic community comes from, but he singled out two pressing issues that involve the relationship between the two churches. The first was the seizure of the Catholic community's cultural heritage by the Orthodox Church, which turned the Catholic churches into Orthodox churches in 1989-91. Since then, the Catholic community has been

fighting for their return to their rightful owners. The second issue he identified is the mass conversion of Catholics to Orthodoxy. He mentioned cases in southern Georgia where Catholics were being recruited into service and faced with the choice of either being rechristened and thus keeping their jobs or staying faithful to Catholicism and losing them. Catholics also often had to be rechristened before the marriage ceremony, he said, adding that such pressures are frequent in schools and universities as well.

The important issue is what constitutes a religious group faced with harsh opposition and numerous barriers in the public space. According to unofficial statistics, there are about 150 Catholic families in Rustavi today, the vast majority ethnic Georgians from southern Georgia. They came to Rustavi, like other citizens, in search of fortune and contribute to its diversity. Difference not based on ethnicity was perceived as a threat and turned into a basis for discrimination. As one of the clerics of the Catholic church disclosed to me, many Catholics in Rustavi were baptized as Orthodox because they could not withstand the various forms of oppression they faced (50-year-old man). The argument of the opponents of the Catholic Church was based on a small number of parishioners who prayed on the empty piece of land allocated to the church.



Figure 5. Catholic church in Rustavi, Photo by *Tea Kamushadze*.

When I tried to talk to the members of a Catholic church in Rustavi, I found that some of them had been rechristened. When I enquired after the reasons for their conversions, they mentioned that they came from mixed families. However, they did not wish to talk about the issue in more detail. The service I attended at Rustavi's Catholic Church was also attended by only seven believers, four of whom were over sixty. There were no young people at all.

For the Latin Catholics, their church's construction in Rustavi only became possible in 2018, and then only in a different place. The five-year fight to get permission to build the church was interpreted as a bureaucratic hurdle imposed by the State Agency of Religious Affairs, and the issue was resolved through a change of location. Instead of 500 square metres, 1200 square metres were allocated for the construction of the church, although on the opposite side of the city in a primarily residential area. Thus, the five-year dispute over the establishment of a Catholic parish in Rustavi was amicably resolved, but the Pope's intervention and reports in the Italian media concerning the violations of religious rights indicated the seriousness of the problem (Meparishvili 2016).

The Muslim Community in Rustavi

Another major challenge to the multicultural nature of the city and its interpretation as such is the Muslim community's search for a site for a mosque in the urban area of Rustavi. The largest ethnic and religious minority in Rustavi are ethnic Azeris who are also citizens of Georgia. They make up about 10% of the city's population.¹³ There are currently no mosques in Rustavi. Finding traces of Islam in the city is extremely difficult and can even be considered a taboo. Neither representatives of the Christian majority nor Muslims are willing to talk openly about the issue. There is no publicly stated desire to build a Muslim shrine in Rustavi. When I asked the Head of the State Agency for Religious Affairs whether they had received a request from the representatives of the Muslim community to initiate the building of a shrine, I got the following answer:

'There has been no request from the Muslim community in Georgia at this stage regarding the construction of a mosque for the Muslim community.' 'muslimta temis sak'ult'o nagebobis msheneblonastan dak'avshirebit am et'ap'ze sruliad sakaetvelos muslimta sammartvelodan motkhovna ar shemosula' (Vashakmadze 2019).

¹³ These data do not correspond to Geostat's statistics, but speaking unofficially with community members, they indicate this figure for the Azeri population in Rustavi.

It is reported that a Muslim shrine has been opened in a private house in Sanapiro Street, though it is not registered as such, and it is difficult to obtain information about it. Its existence is only talked about, and most of the city's population has no information about it. Only a few residents of Rustavi have confirmed that such a shrine existed. An Azeri girl from Rustavi claimed that she had visited the shrine several times during her school years, but does not remember exactly which building it was in. She mentioned that she is not a believer and therefore was not very interested in such matters. Her parents are not active believers either; they prefer to celebrate religious holidays within the family' (23-year-old woman 2019).

Information concerning Muslim prayer houses is not available online.¹⁴ A young Azeri, a citizen of Georgia who considers himself a devout Muslim, maintained that in the early 2000s there was indeed a gathering of Muslims in a rented house in Rustavi near Sanapiro Street. However, he has not heard anything about the shrine since then. He says believers gather in different places to pray.

'Now, a few days ago we had important days for Shia Muslims. We remembered Mohammed's grandson for ten days. Since we don't have a meeting place, we rented a restaurant and paid 100 GEL a day. What else could we do?'

'akhla ramdenime dghis ts'in, chventvis, shia musulmanebisatvis mnishvnelovani dgheebi iq'o. vikh-senebdi muhamedis shvilishvils, 10 dghis mandzilze. radgan shek'rebis adgili ar gvakvs, vkiraobdit rest'orans, ert dgheshi 100 lars vikhdidit, aba ra gvekna? (29-year-old man 2019).

The man listed three problems that he believes Azeris living in Rustavi have long been concerned about: the absence of a cemetery, a mosque and a school building. The problem concerning the cemetery has recently been resolved, as the city hall allocated a plot to Muslims a few months ago. As for the mosque, he remembers that its construction was prevented by the Orthodox Christians. This fact cannot be confirmed

because it has not been disclosed. Only a small part of the Rustavi population remembers these developments through having witnessed them. An Orthodox girl from Rustavi who commuted on a daily basis to Tbilisi, where she was a university student, considers her native city to be ethnically and religiously diverse. For her, there are no problems apart from that regarding the mosque. According to her, there is an uninhabited area near her apartment. The Azeri population applied to the Mayor's office for access to that area, but the Christian population protested at the construction of the mosque. Residents collected signatures from apartment owners, based on which the municipality decided not to permit the building of a mosque, thus ending the matter. The woman recalls that she was in school at that time, meaning that it must have happened in 2009 or 2010 (24-year-old woman 2019).

Thus, for Muslims, there are many obstacles to their entering the public space in Rustavi. Despite their significant numbers, their position is not or cannot be expressed publicly. The absence of a Muslim shrine in Rustavi can be explained by several factors, one being the higher rates of integration of Azeris into mainstream Georgian society, who do not want to risk their good relationship with their Georgian neighbours. Unlike many of their co-ethnics living in other parts of Georgia, Azeris living in Rustavi have a perfect command of the Georgian language, indicating their close connection with the Georgian population of their city. Another important reason for the absence of any mosque in Rustavi may be connected with the fact that there are many predominantly Azeri villages near the city and that Rustavi Azeri Muslims go there for religious services. They also have in mind the negative environment created by the erection of a monument to Heydar Aliyev¹⁵ in Rustavi in 2013. All in all, the absence

¹⁴ Website of Administration of Muslims of all Georgia: <http://www.amag.ge/>

¹⁵ A monument to Heydar Aliyev, the second president of Azerbaijan, is located in "Old Rustavi", in the Alley of People's Friendship. The opening ceremony was organized by the Ivanishvili government in 2013. Unlike the official television, social media drew much attention to the fact and actively discussed related issues. Most of the comments were negative, asking

of any Muslim shrine in Rustavi does not cause much anxiety or a desire for open resistance on the part of the local Azeris and their relations with the Georgian population at large. The community of Azerbaijani speakers does not want to hinder the process of their integration with ethnic Georgians by demanding the right to public religiosity (29-year-old man).



Figure 6. Heydar Aliyev Monument in Old Rustavi, Photo by Tea Kamushadze, 2020.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Rustavi is an interesting place for analysing the place of religion in the post-socialist, post-secular or post-atheist reality. The demand for religious expression in the city, which previously had no sacred sites, increased after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Church construction started not only with the building of new shrines, but also with the revival of existing ones by uncovering the city's different archaeological layers. According to the Soviet national narrative, the communists rebuilt the historic city. The industrial part of Rustavi was built on the foundations of a medieval town through the support of the Soviet Union's fraternal union. The revival of the city's national narrative proposed by the communists includes the massive construction of the city's Orthodox churches. The symbolic significance of these churches goes beyond religious activities and reveals a discourse within the fight for power and power relations. If the con-

why Heydar Aliyev deserves such an honour. As my interlocutors told me, because of the monument some of them refused to walk in a park for some time.

struction of the Orthodox churches echoes the city's national narrative, the ways in which religious plurality is handled in Rustavi goes against its international, multiculturalist narrative as the City of Forty Brothers. This may be related to the decline of industry and the outflow of population from the city. If the issue of religious pluralism in European cities is related to migrants and the migration process, as Giordan noted (2014), in this case, the representatives of different ethnic groups migrated from Rustavi to other parts of Georgia and abroad. The changed ethnic composition that resulted has had a negative impact on Georgians' acceptance of pluralism as a value. An example of this is the legal dispute over the right of Latin Catholics to build a church in Rustavi in which even the Pope interfered. Despite the existence of an Evangelical-Protestant church, now Catholic, and the religious buildings of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Rustavi, there is no mosque or Muslim shrine, even though Muslim Azeris are the second-largest ethnic and religious group in the city. This fact may also be related to the peculiarity of perceptions of Georgian history, in particular the image of Rustavi as a 'medieval' Georgian city. Altogether, the urban space of Rustavi, seen through its religious buildings and related narratives, reflects a fight for power and for the creation of a new order in a city that is otherwise devoid of significance. The iconic representation of religion in Rustavi's space reflects the post-atheist revival of different religious groups and the power relations between them.

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Everyday Nationalism and Non-Traditional Christian Communities in Baku¹

by YULIYA ALIYEVA

Abstract

This article explores the non-traditional Christian Communities (NTCCs) in Azerbaijan and discusses the 'situatedness' of these 'new' religious groups in relation to the national authorities, local communities, and transnational evangelical movements. While contributing to the pluralization of the religious terrain in the post-soviet country, these transnational religious movements are perceived as disruptors, bringing complications to the established religious 'status-quo', and re-defining religion as a matter of personal choice rather than a nominal status acquired at birth. Drawing on ethnographic observations, the paper demonstrates how the production of the 'patriotic narratives' helps these communities to challenge the regime of ethnodoxo and adopt the 'hybridized identity' loyal to the tenets of Azerbaijani civic patriotism and committed to the goals of the transnational faith communities. The appropriation of the ideology of civic nationalism by the NTCCs can be perceived as one of the coping strategies used by these communities to negotiate for wider recognition and acceptance with the authorities and host communities.

Keywords: Azerbaijan, religious revival, non-traditional Christian Communities, civic nationalism, everyday nationalism, transnational faith communities

Introduction

In this article I explore the so-called non-traditional Christian Communities (NTCCs) in Azerbaijan and discuss the 'situatedness' of these 'new' religious groups in relation to the national authorities, local communities, and transnational evangelical movements. Drawing on my ethnographic research I argue that the members of these NTCCs are adopting the 'hybridized iden-

tity' which manifests itself in expression of the civic nationalism and emphasis on belonging to Azerbaijani nation along with display of devotion to transnational faith communities.

While numerous academic papers have addressed issues of religion and the religious in post-Soviet Azerbaijan, the vast majority focused on revival of Islam and the political implications of the growing number of Muslim communities in the country. But the revival of religion and the 'religious' is not limited to Muslim religious groups in all their heterogeneity. The numerous non-Muslim communities, either historically-situated or the outcomes of the new religious influences, produce their own post-atheistic narratives elaborating on how religious re-discoveries helped them to pursue the spiritual needs and mundane interests in the complex post-Soviet environment. My research focuses on the Protestant evangelical communities in Azerbaijan that

The final draft of this paper was submitted for consideration of the editorial committee of the "New Diversities" journal on September 1, 2020. Thus, it does not include information on activities of the NTCCs during the Second Karabakh war and in after-war period.

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are actively engaged in missionary work promoting the conversion to the evangelical Christianity in its polyphonic variety.

It is important to note that 'religiosity' for the majority people in Azerbaijan stands for a cultural foundation of their identity, a 'heritage' rather than strictly followed religious doctrine (Valiyev 2008, Goyushov 2008, Nuruzade 2016, Wiktor-Mach 2017, Darieva 2020). This phenomenon, for instance, was discussed in detail by Ayça Ergun and Zana Çitak (2020) claiming that the secularism and non-Muslim religious identity constitute the foundation of the national identity in post-Soviet Azerbaijan whereas "[r]ather than worship, ritual, and practice, Islam represents a sort of cultural glue, bonding Azerbaijanis to their past and connecting them to their ancestors" (19). This thesis on prevalence of secular values can be extended well beyond the Islamic circles to representatives of other ethnic and religious groups residing in Azerbaijan. While the religious landscape of Azerbaijan is notable for its plurality and the centuries-old co-existence of 'traditional' Muslim (Shia and Sunni), Jewish (Mountainous, Ashkenazi and Georgian) and Christian (Orthodox, Lutheran and sectarians, such as Molokans, Baptists, etc.) communities, for the majority of modern Azerbaijani citizens religion acts mostly as marker of belonging and not the manifestation of individual religiosity. In this respect, new religious Christian and Muslim communities that are linked with transnational religious movements are acting as disruptors; they are bringing complications to the established religious 'status-quo' and are re-defining religion as a matter of personal choice rather than a nominal status acquired at birth.

These disruptions bring a new dynamic to the socio-political life in the country and are often defined as a 'threat' to the stability and social cohesion within the country. While officially the Azerbaijani government replaced restrictive Soviet atheist ideology with the more moderate religious policies, welcoming religious pluralism and 'multiculturalism' in the country, the 'non-traditional' sects, that do not belong to

the 'indigenous' religious communities outlined in the official discourse as mainstream Islam, Orthodox Christianity and Judaism, are under the constant scrutiny and control. The authorities are specifically cautious about the operations of the so-called 'non-traditional' Muslim religious communities which are often accused of pursuing long-term political goals or engagement in terrorist networks (Bashirov 2018). Even the political aspirations of the so-called non-traditional Christian sects are quite insignificant or totally irrelevant; their activities are also closely monitored and are often restrained. In the first part of the article I discuss the complex relationship between the state and NTCCs and illustrate how they have evolved in light of internal and external influences and with the growing visibility of evangelical groups. In the second part, I focus on the practices of 'everyday nationalism' among evangelical Christians which shape their everyday life experiences and how they navigate expressing religious and nationalistic sentiments.

'Non-Traditional' Religious Communities and Their Uneven Relationship with the State

Azerbaijan is often praised for being a "largely successful and functioning laboratory for a civic nation and moderate Islam in the modern world" (Cornell, Karaveli, Ajeganov 2016: 112). The majority of recent scholarship on religion, politics, and society in Azerbaijan has focused on the complexities of national and religious identity in the post-Soviet context where the 'religious' was always equated with the dominant trend of Islamic revival in the country. Many scholarly debates were dedicated to the discussion on how radical or far-reaching such a revival can be and whether it poses a challenge to the well-established traditions of secularism threatening the image of Azerbaijan, as Svante Cornell (2011) puts it, as "the most progressive and secular-minded areas of the Muslim world" (268). While the Islamic manifestations of religiosity were studied in all their variety of forms starting from the 'nominal' cultural identity to the non-traditional Islamic movements, the non-



Figure 1. The Church of the Saviour (Azerbaijani: Xilaskar kilsəsi; also known as the kirkha). © Yulia Aliyeva, 2019.

Muslim religious trends were seldom coming to scholarly attention and were probably deemed as scant and thus insignificant (Alizadeh 2018). The existence of these non-Muslim groups produces noteworthy internal controversies testing the limits of the ‘new unifying national ideology’ offered by the political regime. Depending on the official status of these groups, in terms of their ability to secure the state permission for operations, their showcases are often used either to add up to the international promotion of ‘official version’ of Azerbaijan as a unique example of peaceful coexistence and collaboration (Sadiqov 2017) or to spark the criticism on the government for creating the most sophisticated and intelligent system to suppress religious freedoms (Open Doors 2018). I will later discuss the nature of these uneven relationships with the state and how it has been changing along the transformation of the government’s ideological doctrine.

According to official estimates, less than five percent of the nation’s nine million citizens identify with non-Muslim religious groups, such as Orthodox Christians, Jews, Krishna, Baha’i, other Christian denominations including Roman Catholic, Alban-Udi and Protestant Churches². The

major problem with the official religious statistics is its primordial nature resting on the assumption that ethnic belonging predetermines one’s religious affiliation. Following this logic, the data on ethnic groups collected during the census is converted into the religious affiliations. Thus, the majority of ethnic Azerbaijanis, Talyshs, Lezgi are automatically assigned into the category of Muslims, Slavic ethnic groups (Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians) into Orthodox Christians, Germans to Lutheran Protestants, etc. As such, ‘ethnodoxy’, defined by Karpov, Lisovskaya and Barry (2012: 639) as “an ideology that rigidly links a group’s ethnic identity to its dominant faith” continues to play the key role in assigning people into the statistically pertinent faith categories. However, with the growing pluralization of the religious space in the post-Soviet Azerbaijan, a belief that one is ‘born into the faith’ is being challenged by groups actively engaged in proselytizing offering a range of experiences be it conversions to Salafi Islam or evangelical Christianity. These “conversion-led movements,” as defined by David Lehman (2013), offer similar experi-

four are Christian, eight are Jewish, one is Krishna and two are Baha’i. There are fourteen churches and seven synagogues in Azerbaijan (http://www.dqdk.gov.az/az/view/pages/306?menu_id=83); Administrative Department of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan - Presidential Library - Religion (Date not specified) http://files.preslib.az/projects/remz/pdf_en/atr_din.pdf

² According to recent data published on the website of the State Committee on Religious Associations of the Republic of Azerbaijan, there are 941 religious communities registered in Azerbaijan since 2009 to date, 906 of which are Muslim communities, twenty-

ences to their followers regardless of one's religious denomination sharing "one factor in common: their followers describe their adherence in terms of a life-changing conversion experience." However, it is very difficult to judge the scope and impact of these new religious influences on social and political developments in the country, what often opens the floor for speculations and security concerns.

The focus of the current paper are the so-called 'nontraditional' Christian communities (henceforth NTCCs), uniting the groups which are also commonly labeled as neo-Pentecostal, Charismatic or Evangelical. I prefer to use the term NTCCs in the Azerbaijani context since it encompasses all evangelical movements disregarding the theological differences between them and the length of their historical presence in Azerbaijani. They are contrasted with 'traditional' churches such as Orthodox, Catholic or Lutheran, defined by a distinct hierarchy and traditional liturgy, whose presence in Azerbaijan is supported by the direct appointments from the respective religious centers. The NTCCs are more autonomous movements. They maintain close ties with transnational evangelical networks but enjoy decentralized religious authority, urging them to pave their own ways in the local context.

Categorizing religious groups into 'traditional' and 'nontraditional' is widespread in the post-Communist Eastern Europe and it is closely associated with the idea of the revival of religious traditions outlawed by the atheistic Soviet regime. But while in the certain post-Soviet countries the division of religious groups into 'traditional' and 'nontraditional' was incorporated into the legislative framework (Aitamurto 2016; Račius 2020), the state officials in Azerbaijan recognize this division as 'conventional.' For instance, the Deputy Chairman of the State Committee on Work with Religious Associations (SCWRA), Siyavush Heydarov, talks about certain societal misconceptions in an interview: "... It is sometimes misunderstood in society that all non-traditional religious communities are unacceptable, or that their activities are destructive. This approach

is not valid. We emphasize that the state's attitude towards religious communities varies not because they are traditional or non-traditional, but because they do or do not comply with the existing laws." (Bingöl 2018) Thus, in the context of post-Soviet Azerbaijan, much greater importance is placed on the 'official status' of the religious groups as 'registered' and 'unregistered', approved or disapproved by the state authorities, as acquisition of the state registration provides a formal endorsement for operations in the country.

The findings presented in the article draw upon the fieldwork I conducted in Baku city from January to June of 2019. My fieldwork included visits to the charismatic church 'Word of Life', the neo-charismatic Vineyard church, Lutheran church, Presbyterian (positioning as Azerbaijani-language chapter of the Lutheran church), Seventh Day Adventists, 'New Life' Evangelical church as well as my brief encounters with the members of New Apostolic and Baptist churches³ and one leader of the unregistered religious community located in the regional center of Azerbaijan. Some of these churches were established by foreign missionaries, others by local religious leaders, often spinning off from other local NTCCs.

³ All communities included to the fieldwork are registered with the State Committee on Religious Associations of the Republic of Azerbaijan (SCWRA). Attempts to establish contact with unregistered Christian groups located in Baku were unsuccessful as the community leaders refused to be interviewed. A leader of the unregistered religious community located in one of the regions of Azerbaijan explained that the community has not filed the registration documents since it has less than fifty adult permanent members, which is the minimum requirement established by law. The worship of this unregistered group takes place in his private house. At the beginning of his 'religious career' as a local community leader he used to have problems with the local authorities and was under close surveillance. But starting in 2013, community members were allowed to gather for regular prayers in his home, which he attributes to his ability to persuade people that his activities are 'not dangerous' and, to the contrary, serve to the interests of the community and help to 'cure' socially undesirable traits, such as alcoholism and drug abuse and even religious fanaticism.



Figure 2. Worship of the Vineyard Church in the Church of the Saviour, Baku. © Yulia Aliyeva, 2019.

Although all these churches have their own atmosphere, repertoire of worship, and methods of communication with parishioners, they are offering the adherents spiritual renewal along with a strong sense of community in a very similar manner, strengthening the faith through the nets of intimate interpersonal interactions beyond the walls of the church. All of these communities, except for the Lutheran church, are engaged in missionary work with different intensity and success and see it as a moral obligation of the community members. The history of the Baptist, Molokan, Seventh Day Adventist and the Pentecostalist communities in Azerbaijan is rooted back to when the territory of Azerbaijan was on the periphery of the Russian Empire, where the ‘undesirable’ Christian groups, often in opposition with the Orthodox Christianity were exiled. The ethnicity of these early settlers was mostly of Slavic origin (Russians, Ukrainians), however, some German colonizers splitting from Lutheran churches were also actively engaged in religious

pluralization of the field (Alizadeh 2018). During Soviet times the devotees of these communities suffered years of prosecution and condemnation, gradually resuming the permission for religious practice under the close surveillance starting in the 1960s (Hasanli 2018). Nowadays, these churches are treated as ‘traditional’ or as indigenous groups and are considered to be part of the common national historical heritage.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union brought about a vibrant dynamic to the religious field. One of the first legal acts was adopted in Azerbaijan following the dissolution of the Soviet Union was the law „On freedom of religious beliefs „ (August 20, 1992) which guaranteed individual right to determine and express his/her view on religion and to execute this right. The Law opened the possibility for free practice of religion, attendance of religious services in mosques and churches, and public celebration of religious holidays or commemorations. The restrictions in which one had to compromise one’s career in

the communist party with one's religious beliefs were lifted, which led to a 're-discovery' of one's religious roots. For instance, one of the first visits of the late President Heydar Aliyev (former KGB general) after becoming the President of the independent Azerbaijan was a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca.

As JDY Peel (2009: 184) rightly argues, "the opening up of the Soviet bloc to the new religious influences has occurred at a time when, owing to religious development elsewhere in the world, transnational flows of religious influence have become much more polycentric and multi-directions than we have hitherto thought of them". Azerbaijan was no exception, as these transnational influences brought a new life to the 'traditional' Christian communities or helped many to discover a new 'religious' identity. The geography of the Christian missionaries in Azerbaijan was extremely diverse stretching from the Nordic countries to South Korea, from the United States to Belarus, from the UK to Russia. Some of them joined existing communities, bringing financial flows, literature and even new practices to the communities which, for decades, were disentangled from fellow worshippers. Some foreign missionaries started new churches, bringing new spiritual experiences to a country torn by the war, poverty and social tensions. These neo-Pentecostal or Charismatic movements were offering people a spiritual renewal and hope for a better life and well-being now, running various support programs from foodbanks to the needy to patronage services to the elder and empowering programs for youth such as computer literacy and English language courses. The respondents from the interviewed churches (Lutheran, Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist, Orthodox Christian, Word of Life) recall the 90s as a "Golden era." The number of worshippers in all Churches proliferated rapidly, but 'missionary' churches were particularly successful, building up their communities from 'scratch.' The churches were serving not only the close circle of their adherents but provided humanitarian assistance to the population in general, targeting the most vulnerable

circles: the elderly, IDPs and refugees. Old photos featuring missionary leaders jointly with the President Heydar Aliyev from the mid-90s still serve the communities as a justification that their in-country presence was approved in the highest echelons.

However, starting toward the end of the 1990s and beginning in 2000, government officials' attitudes towards NTCCs began to change. The report about including Azerbaijan into an "Evangelization 2000" program introduced by foreign missionaries was featured in a book by Ramiz Mehdiyev (2005). He was the former Chief of Presidential Administration and considered to be one of the key government strategists at that time. The frightening accounts shared the far-reaching plans of converting every fifth Azerbaijani to Christianity by 2010 and Azerbaijan as a whole by 2040. Mehdiyev also accused missionaries of spreading ideas that stained Islam (191). Given geopolitical location of Azerbaijan, the report assumed that the missionaries were trying to make use of Azerbaijan in their geopolitical battle and their goal was to strategically convert the country into the base area for Western countries to expand their influence further to Iran, Turkey and Central Asia (192). Later, in 2011, these concerns reemerged in Milli Majlis (National Parliament) by the deputy of the Caucasus Muslims leader Sheihulislam Allahshukur Pashazade, Hacı Sabir Hasanli, calling for stricter regulations of the Christian missionary activities in Azerbaijan (Milli Majlis, Stenogram 2011).

In media reports, the converts were often accused of acting in the interest of 'alien forces.' For instance, in 2013, at least three young male followers of the Jehovah Witnesses were prosecuted for 'evading military service' and received sentences ranging from nine months to one year in prison (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2016). The newspaper reports accused them of befriending the enemies and betrayal to the state (Media TV 2015, Alekperova 2017). Thus, repressive measures against the non-traditional Christian communities were justified by the need to protect national interests and the

local population from the hostile forces. Quite often, the media reports did not account for any differences between the NTCCs, placing Jehovah Witnesses and evangelical Christians into a box and treating them as a single entity managed from one center that knows how to skillfully penetrate the local social fabric. The degrading label 'sect,' inherited from Soviet times and associated with illegal religious practices, was widely used in media reports to stress the 'evil' and dangerous nature of these religious groups. The police raids were regularly reported in the media indicating how the law enforcements is protecting the citizens from 'unwanted influences' and help the 'brainwashed' to go back to 'normal' lifestyle. The level of repression varied, and the respondents suggested that they were often harsher against the Azerbaijani-language chapters of the NTCCs who were accused of proselytizing among the Muslims. The prosecutions and intimidations of the adherents of the NTCCs were regularly condemned in the embassies and international organizations' reports, which criticized the government for violating the freedom of religion.

New regulations and policies to control religious communities' operations in Azerbaijan were put forward with the establishment of the SCWRA in 2001. One of the principle tools of control was the introduction of the obligatory registration procedures for all religious communities, regardless of denomination. The registration procedures were harshened in 2009, as all previous registered organizations were forced to re-register by providing the application documents that detailed the specific location where worship would take place, as well as passport details of at least fifty adult followers registered (*propiska*) within that locality. Performance of worship in the places outside of the location indicated in the registration documents was prohibited. Although the regulations are equally applied to all religious communities, the numerous accounts suggest that the registration process for 'non-traditional communities' was more challenging than for traditional ones, resulting in prolonged procedures or even court

settlements. The SCWRA also reviewed all religious literature (printed, video and audio) that had been imported or was published in Azerbaijan, and issued control marks (*nazarat markası*) for the literature, which is allowed for sale and distribution in Azerbaijan. The new rules prohibited foreigners in church leadership (except a special arrangement with Lutheran and Catholic churches) and open proselytism.

However, after 2013, the government stance with regard to the NTCCs got milder and moved from the 'prosecute and restrict' to 'regulate and control.' The change in the attitude is attributed to the launch of the so-called 'Politics of Multiculturalism,' which promoted religious tolerance as a unique feature of the post-Soviet Azerbaijan.

According to Elshad Iskanderov, the Chairman of SCWRA in 2012-2014 and presumably one of the architects of the "Multiculturalism policy": "Tolerance is an integral part of the national identity of the Azerbaijani people and its wealth is much more valuable than the oil" (Abdullayeva 2013). Thus, the government started 'exporting' the image of 'Multiculturalism,' turning it into an asset to improve the country's image in light of the negative publications and resolutions of international organizations, condemning the authoritarian governance and violation of human rights. The international scholars were invited to explore the 'unique' character of Azerbaijani multiculturalism, defining it as a 'third way,' alternative to 'melting pot' and 'isolation model' (Şancariuc 2017), teaching Europe "a lesson" "about ways to protect minorities without compromising the values of the majority of the population" (Stilo 2016).

Whereas the politics of 'multiculturalism' was clearly a project informed by the foreign agenda of the government, it started to impact the local environment. Since the proclaimed government policy was not in line with the repressions against NTCCs and critical reports condemning the prosecutions were still being released, the government began to readjust. By the end of 2015, the twelve Christian Communities had been registered by the state, including the controversial



Figure 3. Emblem of Azerbaijan Bible society (open book of the backdrop of Azerbaijani flag). © Yulia Aliyeva, 2019.

Jehovah Witnesses community. However, all registered communities are located in Baku and big cities of Azerbaijan, such as Ganja and Sumgayit⁴, pointing to the challenges associated with registration of the communities located beyond urban areas. This disparity is often attributed to the insufficient number of parish members in these communities that qualify them for registration. However, some of the informants mentioned a lack of acceptance of the converts in the rural areas, which are organized along the strong horizontal community ties and higher level of intolerance of the local authorities. This resistance of the local communities can make people abandon their newly-acquired faith or practice in secrecy, maintaining the ties with the group located in big cities. One of the interviewers compared worshipping in Baku to 'drinking water' (*su içmek kimi*); people feel more at ease in the large metropole and can more freely engage in building their religious networks.

The promotion of Multiculturalist policy in the country also impacted the issue of access to the religious sources. For many years it was not possible to print any Christian literature inside the country. The importation of Christian literature from outside was strictly regulated and limited. However, since 2016 the Azerbaijan Bible Society

has received its registration and opportunity to print not only the Bible, but other Christian literature and children's books in Russian and Azerbaijani (still subject to approval by the authorities before going on sale). The Azerbaijan Bible Society also serves as an umbrella organization that carries out joint events for evangelical protestant communities of Azerbaijan and cooperates closely with the SCWRA. It also regards promoting unity among the Christian churches in Azerbaijan its mission. For instance, starting in 2016, the annual celebration of the Bible Day became an inter-confessional tradition with participation of all registered Christian Communities, including Catholic and Lutheran churches, with the exception of the Orthodox Christian Church, which tends to approach the cooperation with the 'sectarians' very carefully, although there are internal voices calling for closer engagement⁵.

The NTCCs got to literally 'sit at the table' as they started to be invited to events and official visits abroad organized by the SCWRA to demonstrate the politics of Multiculturalism 'in action.' According to Pastor Rasim Khalilov⁶, a Chairman

⁴ http://www.scwra.gov.az/ru%20/view/pages/297?menu_id=81

⁵ Based on my interview with Konstantin Kolesnikov, the representative of the Russian Orthodox Church in Baku, January 2019.

⁶ To ensure the privacy and safety of informants, I am using the pseudonyms for the interviewed leaders of the evangelical communities and do not identify churches with which they are affiliated. The only exception is Pastor Rasim Khalilov, Chairman of Azer-

of Azerbaijan Bible Society, the attitude towards the registered NTCCs has changed and they are now treated similarly to the 'traditional' ones:

In recent times everything has changed as if by the wave of the hand. And I think behind it is the competent policy of those in power, because they see that there is no danger coming from us, from Protestants and from Christians. We do not pursue illusions, such as taking over the power here, stand at the helm of government, and so on. We have our own themes: we love God, we pray to God, we praise God, we gather, we preach the Word of God... When people see this, sensible people at the top, they understand that they should not expect any insidious actions from these people, because we, as Christians, have gained trust to ourselves. Well, hence, if for twenty years starting in the nineties, we were respectively watched by the relevant authorities, and they saw what we can and what we cannot do. And our actions, they can be used for the good of Azerbaijan. If they help us, and we help them. And over the past five years, I have traveled and promoted the values of Azerbaijan, Christian values, values of tolerance, multiculturalism, about how Azerbaijan is changing today...

According to this passage, the past twenty years were the period when members of the NTCCs managed to develop competence by testing the limitations of the 'religious market' and gaining awareness of what was politically permissible. The important turn in approach towards the 'non-traditional' religious groups was the rhetoric of juxtaposition of the 'peaceful' NTCCs to the non-traditional Muslim religious communities, regarded as 'dangerous' and politically motivated by the Azerbaijani government. Admitting the awareness of the close surveillance of the religious groups in Azerbaijan, Pastor Rasim Khalilov stresses the value of trust, which NTCCs managed to build gradually, through a demonstration of loyalty towards the current political regime and observance of the legal regulations.

This general awareness of being closely watched and having 'official spies' within the congregation was acknowledged during an interview with many religious leaders. For instance,

bajjan Bible Society since he is a well-known public figure and makes constant appearances in the local mass media.

Pastor J. from one of the NTCCs welcomes this kind of surveillance to circumvent rumors and speculations: it helps him to reaffirm himself as an 'innocent' character of his religious community:

I know that my sermons are recorded and listened to by the authorities. But let them record and listen, I am totally fine with it. Let them know what happens here on Sundays and realize that we are quite harmless...

At the same time, over the last twenty years the political elite has built their own 'religious' competence and understanding of the value that NTCCs can bring in promoting Azerbaijan as a land of tolerance and peaceful co-existence of different faith groups. The close cooperation with the government bodies, mainly SCWRA and the Baku International Center for Multiculturalism, helped not only to secure a place for the NTCCs to have a 'seat at the table' but also made them active participants in propaganda events. For instance, as Chairman of the Azerbaijan Bible Society, Pastor Rasim Khalilov was a member of the numerous official delegations organized by the SCWRA to Europe and the US, participating with various political platforms, including OCSE (Salamnews 2018). These activities were criticized by the religious watchdog organizations, which consider that the government is using NTCCs to promote the positive image of the country abroad, whereas the reality is not that 'rosy' and many communities, especially those based outside of the capital city Baku, are struggling to get registered and possibly operate at all (Open Doors 2018).

Another important factor, which potentially contributed to the improved relationship between the evangelical Churches in Azerbaijan and the government is the 'Israeli factor.' Israel is seen as one of the principle strategic partners of Azerbaijan, being the third largest trading partner and aiding the government in an effort to diversify the country's economy⁷. But what

⁷ For more information on diplomacy and policy support of Israel and Jewish lobby to Azerbaijan please see: Ismayilov, M. 2018. "The Changing Landscape



Figure 4. Different editions of the Bible published by Azerbaijan Bible Society. © Yulia Aliyeva, 2019.

is even more important the Jewish diaspora in the US occupies the central position lobbying for the interests of Azerbaijan. Given the nature of the special relationship between the evangelical community and state of Israel and Jews (Smith 1999), it is not accidental that a few delegations dispatched from the US included the variety of evangelical pastors under the leadership of American Rabbi. So, the lobbying for the interests of the Azerbaijani state in the US, in turn, resulted in the promotion of the interests of local evangelical communities within the state institutions (Batrawy 2019).

Paradoxically, the improved relationship between the government and the NTCCs can also be attributed to the successful implementation of restrictive state policies, which cer-

tainly contributed to the marginal success of the NTCCs in terms of winning ground and attracting adherents. The official numbers for the registered Evangelical communities claim that the total number of adherents is about 6,100-6,300 (Alizadeh 2018). Pastor Ramiz Khalilov considers that while the number of evangelical churches has increased, the number of the followers has remained relatively the same. According to his estimates, the number of converts from the 90s consisted of 2,500-3,000 individuals, which added to the existing number of Protestants. The total made up no more than 10,000 worshippers, which is quite a moderate result for Azerbaijan's population of ten million.

Pastor E. noticed that the number of converts could have been much higher, if the communities were not forced to continue their operations within the government framework of 'strict regulations and control.' According to him, the ban on proselytizing, the social stigmatization of the converts, combined with the official and unofficial surveillance by the government, restricts

of (Political) Islam in Azerbaijan: Its Contextual Underpinnings and Future Prospects. *Central Asian Affairs* 5(4): 342-372, p. 361; Lindenstrauss, Gallia. 2015. "Israel-Azerbaijan: Despite the Constraints, a Special Relationship". *Strategic Assessment* 17 (4), January 2015.

the growth of the NTCCs. He also pointed to the gender factor, as women tend to make the decision about conversion more easily than men, and make up most of the worshipper in the churches. For men, such decisions are more challenging, which can be explained by their higher social status, greater inclusion in public life and the fear of damaging their reputation or maybe even be ostracized by colleagues or friends. The pastor deliberated that such decisions do not cause such serious consequences for women, and they are generally tolerated by their families; family members are happy that women do the 'prayer job' for the whole family and acquire the new social network, which also may entail familial benefits. Still, there might be some women who attend church services in secret from their husbands, but it is not common.

Pastor A. noticed that a number of the parishioners in the Charismatic and neo-Charismatic religious communities is growing, especially among the youth, but slowly. In general, all interviewed pastors stressed that the goal of the NTCCs is not to race for dramatic growth of their churches, but to welcome and embrace all who are seek the "Word of God". Given the ban on proselytizing or, as worshippers call it 'the practice of 'evangelichit' (евангеличать), new members get to know their communities via personal networks, when the adherents spread message in close circles of relatives and friends, usually sharing testimonies of how their life has changed following the conversion.

Informants often indicated that the language of worship was one of the key factors when making their decision in favour of one of the NTCCs. The divide of the population to Russian and Azerbaijani speaking groups is a very sensitive issue in Azerbaijan, often associated with the post-colonial heritage and maintenance of the strong cultural and economic ties with neighboring Russia. Russian language curriculum continues to be popular among various ethnic groups, not only of Slavic origin, as it is believed that education in Russian language provides with better academic knowledge and professional opportuni-

ties in the future⁸. The language issue is more apparent in Baku rather than in more homogeneous communities outside of the metropole. This profound divide of the urban population to Russian-speaking and Azerbaijani-speaking groups impacts the internal organization of the churches. For instance, Adventists, Baptists and Lutherans have two separate groups worshipping every Sunday: the Russian division is for primarily Russian-speakers and the Azerbaijani division is for Azerbaijani-speaking groups. What is interesting is that these language groups have no or very limited interactions with each other and they often unite people belonging to different social categories. For instance, the parish of the Russian division is represented mainly by the elder generation, primarily of women, of ethnically mixed or Slavic origin, whereas the parish of the Azerbaijani division brings together younger people, primarily ethnically Azerbaijanis. In Charismatic churches, the approach is more inclusive, as the worship is conducted in both languages, Russian and Azerbaijani, with simultaneous translation of speeches and songs.

Having the Russian language as the medium of communication facilitates the inclusion of the local NTCCs into the post-soviet networks of evangelical churches. However, many informants stressed the increasing influence of the Turkish evangelical communities, which organize regular exchange visits and broadcast Christian channel in Turkish language in Azerbaijan⁹ and sometimes invite local pastors as guest-speakers. The increased use of English language opened up the possibility for many religious leaders and regular community members to receive their reli-

⁸ The number of public Russian-only schools has not significantly changed since 1989; there are sixteen Russian schools in Azerbaijan and 380 schools which offer both Azerbaijani and Russian streams. The number of pupils who choose to study in Russian has been increasing over the last years, especially in Baku (Shiriyev 2017).

⁹ The Azerbaijani language is a part of the Turkic family, which makes Turkish and Azerbaijani very similar, and although there are significant differences, both communities can often understand one another without the need for translation.

gious education in Western Europe (for example, in Norway, Sweden and Austria) or in the US. So, the bilingual and multi-lingual parishioners can benefit from the broader geographical engagements.

In this sub-chapter I tried to demonstrate how the relationships between the government and the NTCCs has changed over the last twenty years, and has been informed by changes in the country's internal strategy; work with religious communities and foreign strategy aimed to promote Azerbaijan as "a showcase for religious tolerance in the Islamic world, and beyond" (Bedford and Souleimanov 2016: 6). The 'loosening' of government regulations helped some of the NTCCs acquire 'official status' through registration and develop 'survival strategies' by building relationships of trust and mutual benefit with the authorities. The key prerequisites for operations of the NTCCs in Azerbaijan thus include two factors: loyalty to the current political regime and withdrawal from open proselytism, especially among Muslims. At the same time, not all NTCCs are included in this 'positive process,' as some communities, especially those located outside of the big urban areas, such as Baku, are still striving for recognition and registration, restrained either by the strict regulations or negative attitudes of the local communities.

Evangelical Patriotism

The NTCCs are often described in academic literature as transnational social spaces beyond normatively defined ethnic or national communities, engaged in production of the transgressive cultural constructs. By participating in the NTCC, a convert joins this transnational space and acquires a hybrid, transnational identity, similar to the experiences of the migrants (Levitt and Schiller 2004). This "in-betweenness" extends her networks beyond the local group into the transnational community, acknowledging the existence of brothers and sisters in myriad of global localities and faith gurus of various nationalities. Although the dynamics of religious life varies for each individual along with one's

involvement in transnational ties, the converts' novel experiences transform their 'habitus' – their identity and typical social interaction patterns (Bourdieu 1991). The changes also involve transformation of the practices of consumption of religion and the 'religious' as translocal experiences without any engagement in physical mobility. It no longer limits itself to individual spiritual engagements but involves constant exposure to the transnational encounters by hosting the presenters from across the globe, participation in the international meetings and gatherings, study abroad, not to mention the use of congregation's social media, radio and TV channels. During one of the gatherings of the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Baku the community was called to fundraise for the needs of the Adventist radio located in Ethiopia; in March 2019, women from a number of Protestant communities based in Baku came together to celebrate Women's World Day of Prayer worshipping for their sisters from Slovenia; in the Vineyard Church an ensemble of Korean girls were dancing a national dance praising Jesus followed by the Ukrainian pastor's sermon, in which he shared his story of finding faith in Jesus; in the Lutheran church, the choir from Georgia was singing psalms jointly with local parishioners and pastors from Germany and Pakistan. These are just a few examples of the transnational experiences, which I witnessed during a few months of fieldwork. These remarkable global encounters are ultimately present in all NTCCs, enriching the local patterns with supranational meanings and fostering the common mission of sharing the Gospel and helping others to attain 'salvation.' As Orlando Woods (2012: 203) argues, evangelical groups "transcend the boundaries imposed by the state and enforced by indigenous religious groups, as they actively seek to baptize people into a trans-ethnic, trans-territorial faith community". All these trans-territorial communities obviously have 'centralized' localities based outside of Azerbaijan, in Western countries, bringing a new sense to the 'extended habitus' of being westernized, thus modernized and progressive.



Figure 5. Worship of the Evangelical-Lutheran Congregation in Baku, the Church of the Saviour. Pastors from Germany and Pakistan and choir from Georgia. © Yulia Aliyeva, 2019.

What is peculiar to Azerbaijani NTCCs, though, is its ‘localization’ through the expression of patriotism which is particularity apparent in neo-Pentecostal Churches. Whereas other scholars notice that in other post-Soviet locations they have found “very few references to ethnicity and nationality” (Lankauskas, 2009) in charismatic Christianity communities or the fact that “evangelicalism begins to overshadow, but not necessarily reject the importance of previously invested in other forms of identity, such as nationality” (Wanner 2009), the Azerbaijani representatives of the Christian communities tend to continue active engagement with their national identity, stressing the importance of the sense of nationhood and a sense of belonging to it.

The state-promoted ideology of civic nationalism, defined by citizenship regardless of ethnicity, language or religion, and united in attachment to the state has been the central policy of the government since Azerbaijan gained independence

in 1992 (Siroky and Mahmudlu 2016). Although the inclusivity of the ‘civic nationhood’ in Azerbaijan is often questioned because of application of certain restrictive practices incompatible with the liberal-democratic norms, this ideological stance operates in the interests of the NTCCs allowing them to get situated and justify their presence in Azerbaijan.

Based on data collected during my fieldwork in Baku, I argue that the ideology of civic nationalism is widely shared by the members of NTCCs. The process of post-Soviet nation-building in Azerbaijan was coeval with establishment and development of these communities. The widely discussed ability of the NTCCs to adapt and accommodate to the shifts in economic, political, and other societal structures became an important factor which allowed them not only to build ground for new religious orientations, but also to incorporate and share with the local communities the ‘imaginary of a new nation.’ The cen-

tral idea that the membership in transnational faith communities does not preclude, but even strengthens one's patriotic spirit and devotion and care for motherland allows for redefinition of identity and accommodation of its fragments. This 'hybridized identity' can be regarded as one of the 'coping strategies' for these communities, which allows for contextualizing of their new experiences acquired with conversion to evangelical Christianity. At the same time, it serves as a ground for negotiations with the host communities and the state towards greater acceptance and accommodation.

The shifts in the ideological stances of 'Azerbaijani civic patriotism' also contributed to the changes in political rationale, opening wider space for negotiation and cooperation between the state and evangelical communities. The first attempt of construction of the post-Soviet national ideology was named 'Azerbaijanism' – an overarching identity that includes all citizens, regardless of ethnicity or religion, still emphasizing Azerbaijanis as the titular ethnic group and the unifying dominant culture (Siroky and Mahmudlu 2016). With the launch of the politics of 'Multiculturalism,' the government policy took a more inclusive turn, stressing the historical legacy of peaceful co-existence of different ethnic groups and celebrating the religious diversity in Azerbaijan.¹⁰ As discussed by Laurence Broers and Ceyhun Mahmudlu, the foundation of this civic Azerbaijan identity is grounded on three major pillars: loyalty to the current political regime (Aliyev's dynasty); the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and national trauma associated with it; benefits from being a petro-nation; (Broers and Mahmudlu, forthcoming). All these pillars, to a various extent, can be observed across these evangelical groups in the form of the pastor's address to the parishioners invoking the loyalty to country leadership; prayers for resolution of

Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and organization of the humanitarian assistance to people who have been affected by the military clashes; some of the communities are the recipients of the annual donations allocated from the Presidential Fund ,thus, getting their small piece of the 'petro-dollar' pie.

Moreover, NTCCs are actively engaged in the promotion of 'civic nationalism' within the communities through the practices of 'everyday nationalism.' As defined by E. Knott (2016: 1), the 'everyday nationalism' approach focuses on "ordinary people, as opposed to elites, as the co-constituents, participants and consumers of national symbols, rituals and identities" (1). This form of nationalism does not always follow the institutional pathway but emerges as incidents of mindful or unaware articulations of belonging and caring for one's nation. Drawing on the existent literature on the subject, Fox and Ginderachter sum up that this version of the nation is narrated in identity talk, implicated in consumption practices, and performed in ritual practices (Fox and Van Ginderachter 2018).

When discussing the NTCCs, one needs to acknowledge the diversity of the cultural forms and logical frameworks of 'everyday nationalism' across the congregations, as well as the plurality of ethnic and social backgrounds of the converts, which has to be addressed by Church leadership in their attempts to make the communities inclusive and multicultural. I will discuss some elements below of 'everyday nationalism' encountered during my fieldwork, such as identity talks, redefining what does it mean to be a Christian in Azerbaijan; the moral obligation of the parish to engage in 'prayers for Azerbaijan' and care for all Azerbaijani people, regardless of their denomination and finally display of the 'patriotic spirit' through the prayers for resolution of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

The NTCCs generally position themselves as 'apolitical' structures, not engaged in the political processes or striving for political offices. The religious rhetoric employed by the NTCCs also do not differ from the master narrative of other

¹⁰ For more information about 'hybrid' model uniting the idea of 'civic nationhood' and with the 'multiculturalism' policy, please, see the discussion in Cornell, S. E., Karaveli H. M. and Ajeganov B. 2016. "Azerbaijan's Formula: Secular Governance and Civic Nationhood". Silk Road Paper, November 23, 2016.

‘officially approved,’ ‘traditional’ religious groups when it comes to the attitudes to gay-marriages or women’s status in the society. The adherence to patriarchal values were often stressed during the sermons I attended on numerous occasions in various NTCCs, sometimes even praising the Azerbaijani authorities for their ‘right vision,’ while criticizing Western counterparts for betrayal to the Christian values and allowing same-sex unions. The ‘everyday nationalism’ among Azerbaijani Christians manifests itself in an unconscious invocation of the familiar cultural scripts of ‘being Azerbaijani,’ ‘acting as Azerbaijani’ and following the socially accepted gender scripts. Being Christian and ‘acting as Azerbaijani’ can be visually observed during the performances in charismatic Churches, when men usually prefer motionless standing on their feet in the last rows of the hall, whereas women feel more relaxed expressing themselves in ecstatic bodily movements. This tense performance, if asked directly, is explained by being ‘Azerbaijani men.’ For men, showing sentiments and lively performances in public still considered a strong social and internal taboo addressed in the common saying “Kişi ağır olar” – ‘Man should be tough,’ which comes at odds with the joyful and inviting atmosphere of Charismatic worship. This code, though, is violated by Church leadership, predominantly men, showcasing an interesting contrast between the male adherents and ‘community activists.’ These are the males who are closely engaged in the ‘shaping of the religious community,’ received a religious training abroad, or, in other words, have a ‘special status,’ allowing them to redefine ‘masculinity.’ Some of these activist male worshippers are also coming from artistic professions, implying stage performances, what supposedly makes the violation of the code and display of the emotions in public easier for them.

Engagement with the ‘real Azerbaijani men,’ as some of the converts approached by me identified themselves, involved conversations about the nature of male and female interactions and the standards of ‘decent behavior’ in encounters with the opposite gender. The assumptions were

not much different from the patriarchal codes accepted in conservative circles and, for instance, included questioning the nature of my work, which requires the arrangement of the interviews, or otherwise face-to-face meetings, with male strangers.

As discussed in academic literature, the success of the NTCCs, notably in Pentecostal communities, in gaining solid ground around the world is also attributed to creative appropriation of local cultural values and practices (Robbins 2004). As Catherine Wanner (2006) rightly puts it: “Religious practice is grounded in a particular place, even as it transcends it” (14). Thus, the social milieu impacts the way Christian identity is constructed and defined in line with the social expectations of what is pious and morally grounded spiritual life. The comparison with the local traditional religious groups, specifically Muslim communities, were constantly raised by the adherents to demonstrate how they ‘fit’ to the general social fabric, how their moral code and religious practices are in line and not ‘contra’ with the mainstream religions. On the other hand, they were noting the non-militant character of the local Islam, being “the most tolerant Islam in the world,” which shows respect and even love to Saint Mary and Jesus (Invictory 2008).

In conversation, the converts often tried to invalidate their “Otherness” by pointing to similarities with the ‘host group.’ The Christian values, associated with the value of familial networks, mutual support and solidarity, are seen as being in line with ‘the Azerbaijani way of life,’ whereas the withdrawal from consumption of alcohol and tobacco, ban on strong language and promiscuity are regarded as corresponding with the Muslim doctrine. The conversion thus involves creative ways of validating one’s personal faith choice and the production of narratives affirming one’s sense of belonging through acquisition of the hybrid identity.

This involves ‘identity talks,’ representing not just articulation of the one’s perceived identity, but also an attempt to present publicly acceptable narratives. For instance, here is how Pas-

tor R. describes how he comprehends his identity:

"I am a Christian; this is definitely to the bone. But I am also Azerbaijani. To the marrow of my bones as well. As we discussed the Jesus was 100% God and 100% human, 100% iron and 100% flame, so I am 100% Christian and 100% Azerbaijani."

In a discussion, the pastor recalled the conversation of one woman who challenged his claim that Jesus was 100% God and 100% human: she claimed it was mathematically invalid. Later, his mentor in one of the Western churches resolved this theorem by bringing an analogy with iron which is put into the flame, where it turns red, but does not stop being iron but incorporates the heat of the flame, thus creating an incandescent identity, making it firm and inseparable. This analogy not only validated the existence and possibility of 'hybridity,' but also proved it to be a special, 'divine arrangement.'

Quite often, pastors were claimed to be more knowledgeable of the Muslim tradition, accusing the locals of being ignorantly against the NTCCs. Here is the one of the examples of downplaying the Muslim identity in locals:

"Azerbaijanis themselves, according to statistics, 95-96% consider themselves Muslims, but I do not consider them. Why, because only 10% actually perform the requirements of Islam. But the rest... they don't do anything, there are those who only fast during fasting, they are not Muslims. They don't even know what "Kəlmeyi-şəhadə" is. I teach them. I myself, a pastor in Christianity, but I teach them Kəlmeyi-şəhadət. I say, how do you consider yourself a Muslim?... Our people think that after the circumcision is done to the boys, that's all, they are Muslims."

Another pastor was confronting the fellowmen with discussion that the Muslim faith which is not supported by the reading of the religious texts and observance of the rituals resembles ash:

"What is ash? When you take it, it disappears. You want to hold it in your hand but there is nothing left. But faith is the fruit of the relationship, when we have relationships, when we are becoming friends, walk together, do business or anything else, it is here when when our relationships begin to emerge

There are two central narratives when pastors discuss the relationship between the NTCCs with host communities. The first discusses people in Azerbaijan as 'faithless,' disoriented and ignorant. Moreover, they are firmly 'stuck' in 'ethnodoxy,' or a belief that religion is ascribed at birth, which often makes them irresponsible and resistant to the teachings of Christianity. The second point is concerned with the lack of bonding values and cohesion in society. By contrasting the community of Christians where faith is the 'fruit of relationships' not only with Divine forces but also with community members, supporting each other and striving together towards prosperity. So, 'ash,' the religious identity without faith, is considered to be one of the biggest challenges and problems for post-Soviet Azerbaijan.

At least three of the interviewed pastors confessed to having a 'Muslim' phase in their lives, when they were actively practicing Islam, doing *namaz* (daily prayers) and regularly attending mosques. The knowledge accumulated during that period helps them now when they engage with 'culturally Muslims,' as they are aware of the both Quranic and Bible teachings and can lead well-informed debates pointing to similarities and differences in religious discourses. The engagement in such conversations with local populations helps them to re-construct and expand the 'official' meanings of nationalism and nationhood in routine practices. For instance, one of the pastors who was previously involved in criminal activities and heavy alcoholism, considers that his personal example is the best testimony of the almighty God, which he is not shy to share on numerous occasions in tea houses and social gatherings (majlis), including the morning ceremonies lead by mullahs. One of the first challenges for him is to persuade people that "Jesus is not Russian"¹¹ and that Azerbaijanis can also join this religion without compromising their

¹¹ For a discussion about Jesus as the 'Russian God' in Siberia and Central Asia see the contributions to the 'Conversion After Socialism. Disruptions, Modernisms and Technologies of Faith in the Former Soviet Union', Mathijs Pelkmans ed., 2009, Berghahn Books,



Figure 6. Symbolic of the Azerbaijan Republic (national emblem) represented at the facade of the Church of the Saviour following its reconstruction in 2001. © Yulia Aliyeva, 2019.

personal relations or values system, but instead can acquire a solid standpoint for renewed and more mindful spiritual life.

There are also very small and generally quiet attempts to reconsider the status of Islam in Azerbaijan, which may potentially have negative implications in relationship with the authorities, as challenging the 'foundations of national identity.' For instance, Pastor Z pointed out that the Christian history of Azerbaijan is not adequately addressed in the school history textbook, as it does not provide a detailed account about the local resistance to Arab conquest and forceful Islamization. So, the Muslim identity within such discourse appears to be 'alien', enforced from above, in contrast to the Christian faith, voluntarily embraced by Caucasian Albania – one of the predecessors of the modern Azerbaijan.

The second pattern includes manifestations of the 'everyday nationalism' though the script of belonging and careering for the future of the country. Most commonly it is exhibited by the leadership of the churches in the sermons which include musical performances praising Azerbai-

jan, the prayers for its bright future and prosperity, including the requests for higher pensions, stable economy, eradication of poverty in the country and expression of gratitude to the leadership of the country for their benevolence. On one occasion, while congratulating the President of Azerbaijan on his birthday, one of the Pastors concluded that the fact that Ilham Aliyev was born on December 24th may not be an accident but a divine arrangement. This display of loyalty to the regime also includes participation of the representatives of the registered communities in the various events in Azerbaijan and abroad, aimed to demonstrate the politics of tolerance in the country.

I have also witnessed how some of the churches merged religious and national symbolism, producing a hybrid representation. Quite often these are visual images of biblical verses written over the map of Azerbaijan, with the slogan 'God Loves Azerbaijan' on a panoramic picture of Baku or on the national flag with an emblem of Christian society, such as on the logo of the Azerbaijan Bible Institute. This hybridity also manifests itself in the celebration of national, secular holidays in the churches. Almost all churches, for instance, celebrate Women's Day on the eighth of March, the Soviet holiday, by addressing women with the special sermons and prayers, staging the performances for them, mostly engaging kids, and by opening festive tables. In one of the churches, I participated in the celebration of National Flag Day on November ninth, when the national flag of Azerbaijan (visually bigger than flags with Christian symbols) was placed into the center of celebrations, and under the Christian hymns the worshippers were actively waving flags. The performances on that day also included national dances and songs based on national music traditions praising Jesus.

Less perceptibly, discussions about love, the future of Azerbaijani people that are lost in transitions and left without 'moral orientations' are a common part of the internal discourses within the communities. For instance, one Adventist woman, during the Bible readings by the small

'cells,' (groups) was sharing her emotions on how painful it is for her to recognize that her valued colleagues at work, who are not Christians, will suffer enormous pain in the times of the Apocalypse:

"Sometime when I look at them, I imagine the sores and wounds on their skin and I want to cry. Please pray for me to find the strength to help them avoid this horrible fate."

In some churches, special days and hours are dedicated to the prayers for "awakening of Azerbaijan."¹² In one of the churches, these are usually intense musical performances asking God to extend His grace to Azerbaijan, send wisdom to the country's leadership, and to strengthen believers and fortify their faith. In such prayers, not only the church leadership but also parishioners make contributions to the prayer, singing or reciting verses and standing on foot or on their knees in a circle. Of course, the ultimate goal of these prayers, although not openly declared, is salvation of Azerbaijan through its evangelization. At the same time, the prayers are 'inclusive,' wishing good to all people and all communities living on this territory.

Serving in Azerbaijan, being part of the mundane and religious life in the country is defined as a divine opportunity, manifestation of love and care of God for Azerbaijan. Here is an account by one of the pastors on how he was persuaded by his mentor to return to Azerbaijan and start his service there after living for some abroad:

"God is an amazing God, who gives us a choice in everything. It is an amazing gift he gave a person - the opportunity to choose what to drink, where to go, which lifestyle to lead. Believe or not to believe, kill or not to kill. We cannot make a choice of just two things." For me it was something new. I have never heard anything like this... He continued: 'It is who you will be born: a man or a woman. And secondly, where will you be born. These are two things you do not choose... and so God has a perfect plan for you, for your people, in your nation. I am sure

that that God will work with you in Azerbaijan. Go, son, go..."

The major emphasis in this script are assigned to the necessity of serving one's own people and nation, even by making a personal sacrifice and giving up the familiar lifestyle. The personal ambitions and aspirations are then given marginal prominence in light of the necessity to act as an emancipator in one's own nation.

Contrary to this intimate personal account of how one justifies his position in leading an 'alien' religious cult, 'the everyday nationalism' can manifest itself in overt expression of the Church's support of the national interests. This can be best illustrated by the case from the World of Life Church, which starting in 2012 and included in its regular sermons the prayer for Karabakh (Alizadeh 2018). As Rasim Khalilov, the pastor of the church at that time explained, he was touched by the negative developments at the border and appealed to the congregation to do the prayer for Karabakh and return of the occupied territories. The sermon was audio recorded and posted online, raising a wave of discontent in Armenia and what was reported to Khalilov through fellow-congregations located in other countries. But he addressed the critics by evoking the obligation of every Christian to pray for her land: "*I prayed for my land, you pray for your land. That's how it all ended...*"

This case illustrates the situation when the ethno-nationalism comes into conflict with the supra-national ties and importance of the unity within the transnational religious community. The grounded religious practices, along with a skillful adaptation to the dynamics of the political life in Azerbaijan put forth the necessity to outline one's political stance to provide legitimacy for the community. The patriotic narrative along with the expression of one's Azerbaijani identity become the validation of the hybrid identity or re-defined national identity compatible with Christianity. This move also provided credits to the World of Life church as loyal to the

¹² Such prayers are not always open to the public, as in one of the churches I was not allowed to participate; this was justified as being an 'internal matter' of the parish.

general doctrine of the government and further inclusion of the community to the list of 'loyal religious circles' which are invited to take the sit at the table along with the 'traditional communities.'

Thus, the evangelical communities in Baku portray an interesting interplay of transnational and local forces, intersecting and hybrid identities, thus creating "cross-cutting cleavages," defined by Baumann as communities which do not run parallel but rather cut across one another to form an ever-changing pattern (Baumann 2010: 84). Being Azerbaijani and being evangelical Christian signifies the possibility of making a choice in personal spiritual life, but it also implies the struggle for recognition and acceptance. The engagement in 'everyday nationalism' hence becomes the important coping strategy in quest for acceptance connoting belonging and loyalty.

Conclusion

The case of NTCC in Azerbaijan offers a new insight into the interplay of secularism, religion and modernity in the urban environment. The post-Soviet environment opened new opportunities for the development of the NTCCs in Azerbaijan, contributing to the increasing diversity of worship and formation of the new trans-localized identities. The Azerbaijani doctrine of civic nationhood asserts the establishment of the national unity through the promotion of civic equality and multicultural harmony. Although the implementation of this policy has not been always linear and 'inclusive,' it allowed for establishment and operation of the NTCCs in the post-Soviet republic. The ideology of 'Multiculturalism' and development of the mutually beneficial frameworks for cooperation allowed the NTCCs to secure the more stable position and government's endorsement for operations. The existing plurality of the NTCCs and their presence in the symbolic historical sights signifies to the members of these communities the gradual change in government's attitudes and lessens a fear for

any negative consequences because of the conversion.

At the same time, the NTCCs operate in an environment which can be defined as structurally hostile. The major sources of these hostilities are the strict regulations and close surveillance policies targeting all religious communities, not only for the NTCCs, and the widely shared by general public belief in 'ethnodoxy', that the religious faith is ascribed rather than acquired identity. These two aspects pose a critical challenge for development of the communities, but also teach them how to skillfully navigate the local environment and negotiate the restrictions. One of these 'coping strategies' is the promotion of 'everyday nationalism' in the communities, which signifies itself through the narratives of belonging to the nation and solidarity with the fellow country-men when it comes to the developments critical for the nationhood and loyalty to the current political regime as guarantor of the peaceful co-existence with the host-communities and uninterrupted operations for NTCCs.

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Negotiating Urban Religious Space in Batumi: The Case of Catholics and Protestants*

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Abstract

This article addresses the way post-Soviet religious visibility and materiality are taking place in the Georgian port city of Batumi through the organization of sites of worship by the Christian religious minorities. In particular, it attempts to understand the strategies of Catholic and Protestant religious communities to materialize their religious identities in post-Soviet Batumi, something which predominately proceeds alongside the arrangements of the majority religious community. This article is based upon ethnographic research in Batumi where political ideologies have constantly determined the religious identity of the city. Focusing on the small Christian communities in Batumi and their strategies of post-Soviet religious revival through materializing sites of worship in the city, I investigate post-Soviet public religiosity in the multi-religious urban area, where encounters of mainstream faith and religious minorities characterize the religious identity of the city. More specifically, I argue that increasing the power and dominance of the major religious organization determines the public religious landscape of post-Soviet Batumi where organizing Catholic and Protestant places in the urban area of the city is characterized by the consequences of the public visibility and materiality of power of the Georgian Orthodox Church.

Keywords: visibility, religiosity, urban space, Georgia, Catholics, Protestants

Introduction

This article addresses contemporary religious plurality in the Georgian post-Soviet urban space of the port city of Batumi. It considers the materiality and visibility of the religious identity of the Christian minorities (Catholics and Protestants) throughout post-Soviet political transformations and the increasing power of the dominant religious organization (the Georgian Orthodox Church). Recent research on urban religiosity concerns understanding the visual marks of religious groups in the city, defined as “iconic

religion” (Knot, Krech, Mayer 2016), which is a mode of legitimizing their presence in the city. In contemporary European cities increasing waves of migrants and demands for having sites for religious devotion characterize the need for rethinking religious plurality and materiality in public areas. In Georgia (in Batumi), understanding religious spatiality and diversity in the city through visibility, materiality and organizing religious identity is characterized by post-Soviet changes which led to a religious revival in public discourse. Even during the last decade of the Soviet presence in Georgia, increased national and religious feelings led religious communities to organize spaces of worships to legitimize their presence as legal “public domains”: They

* The paper is based on the field works conducted in 2019 within the ZOIS (Centre For East European and International Studies) research project entitled: “Transformation of urban spaces and religious pluralization in the Caucasus”.

created a special zone where the material quality of place and immaterial relationships would intersect, which encompass a particular materially constrained interaction. Visibility constructs the demarcation of the public domain which implies attention and affections (Brighenti 2010: 123-125). Simultaneously, religious buildings were constructed or reconstructed around the areas where the Soviet ideology used to materialize its power. Legitimized by national feelings and rhetoric, the Georgian Orthodox Church rapidly revived its public religious marks in cities. Similarly, other religious communities organized “public domains” (Brighenti 2010) as well, but not as fast as the Georgian Orthodox Church, which is historically considered the “Protector of Georgian culture.” Legally, the Georgian constitution guarantees freedom of religion, but the Georgian Orthodox Church is privileged due to the constitutional agreement between the Georgian state and the Georgian Orthodox Church. Signed in 2002, this agreement establishes that the Constitution of Georgia acknowledges the exclusive role of the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church in the history of the nation and asserts its sovereignty from the state.

Taking this religious predominance into account, this article aims to study the visibility and materiality of Christian minority religious communities (Catholic and Protestant) in Batumi. Batumi is the capital of the autonomous republic of Adjara in the westernmost part of Georgia. It has always been a multi-ethnic and multi-religious city. Due to its port and naval infrastructure on the Black Sea, Batumi has always been of interest to foreigners. Batumi was one of the strongest economic areas during Soviet times, and it experienced rapid decay after the disintegration of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics. In terms of the post-Soviet political and economic transition, Batumi transformed its urban landscape to evoke its citizens’ current religious feelings. In terms of Post-Soviet religious revival, the major religious groups have vividly organized old and new spaces (Orthodox Christians, Muslims) in the city by negotiating or arguing with

political elites. The increasing popularity of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the 1980s needed to legitimize its dominance in Batumi (and in the Adjara region), where Muslims are the second major religious group. In 1989, the local government gave ownership of the building of a high-voltage laboratory (a former Catholic church) to the Georgian Orthodox Church as its “domain,” where the patriarch of Georgia Ilia II baptized Muslim citizens.

Catholics constructed the Holy Mother Virgin Nativity Cathedral in Batumi at the beginning of the twentieth century. During the communist period, Soviet officials closed the cathedral and used the building for different purposes. In the late stages of the Soviet Union, the building was given to the Georgian Orthodox Church. Symbolically, the church demonstrates to the other religious groups in Batumi which community has the power to materialize a sanctuary in the “heart” of the city. As Catholics did not have a site for public religious devotions, they established an alternative space in the city after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and established a diplomatic relationship with the Vatican.

The Protestant community materialized public visibility in the city differently from other religious groups. Currently, several protestant religious groups live in Batumi – Baptists, Charismatics, Pentecostals, the Holy Trinity Protestant Church, et cetera. Most protestant churches hold religious rituals in private houses. The Holy Trinity Protestant Church established a site of religious devotion in the centre of the city in 1995. This community used private spaces to establish the official organization in the city centre. They claim to unite all protestants of Batumi around this religious building. The ways that Catholic and Protestant religious minorities experienced “public recognition” (Brighenti 2010) in Batumi represent their reactions to the Post-Soviet discourse, which determine the involvement of political, and other religious actors, to establish a site of worship in the public spaces.

Considering their historical experiences, this article discusses the way these two Christian

minority groups (Catholic and Protestant) have tried to reestablish their presence in the city by organizing sites of religious devotion. Thus, this article attempts to understand the following questions: How do Catholic and Protestant sites of devotion characterize post-Soviet religious reconfiguration in Batumi, and how do their places of worship materialize religious diversity in the city? Why do they organize their presence in Batumi in such a way, and what are the consequences in the city?

The study draws on ethnographic materials gathered from the citizens of Batumi as part of the ZOiS (Centre for East European and International Studies) research project: "Transformation of urban spaces and religious pluralization in the Caucasus." The fieldwork was carried out from May until December 2018, during which I did ethnographic observations and conducted semi-structured interviews. During my field research, I focused on studying minority Christian organizations, Catholic and Holy Trinity Protestant, that had up to 100-150 adherents in the city. Both religious groups established sites of religious devotion after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and they used to share private space for religious services during Soviet times. Recent ethnographic materials engage with theoretical approaches on visibility, materiality, public religiosity, and religious place-making (Brighenti 2010; Saint-Blacant & Cancellieri 2014; Knot, Krech & Mayer 2016; Burchardt & Giera 2020). In this article, I argue that increasing the power and dominance of the major religious organization determines the public religious landscape of post-Soviet Batumi where organizing Catholic and Protestant places in the urban area of the city is characterized by the consequences of public visibility and the materiality of power of the Georgian Orthodox Church.

Theoretical Approaches to Studying Urban Religiosity

Urban religiosity represents a popular research topic among social scientists. Materiality, visibility, accessibility to public space, and the publicity

of religion in diverse urban areas are interwoven to recognize the presence of the concrete religious community in the city, which has traditionally owned or currently tries to possess the public area for organizing religious practices. Global migration as well as political and economic transformations put into question secularism as a mode of managing religiosity as a social phenomenon. As such, diversity and coexistence are debated in current plural societies. Secularization is a predominant point of interest for scholars of urban religiosity, as religious and secular organizations are actors of shaping cityscapes. In this space, the public is regarded as neutral, nevertheless the religious majority takes advantage of this neutrality. In the "politics of place-making," urban space is an area where particular religions are constructed by the boundaries between communities and diverse practices, which are constant variables (Burchardt & Becci 2013: 9, 17-18).

Current ethnographic research attempts to understand urban religiosity in post-Soviet Batumi as a space in which religious architecture is a model for potential communication between religious groups and politicians. More specifically, I focus on Christian religious minority groups and their modes of organizing their presence in the city by establishing or re-establishing their "religious domains" (Brighenti 2010). Post-Soviet multi-religious Batumi represents a space where drawing constant boundaries between the religious and secular — or the formally secular area where informal politics supported the major religious community — mark the margins between the dominant and the minority religions in the city. In Batumi, public presence alongside rituals, ceremonies, visibility and the materiality of religious architectures represent actors for communities to demonstrate their absence and presence in the concrete area of the city, — in the political, economic and socio-cultural layers. To this extent, through the visibility and materiality of the religious architecture, the concrete religious community draws its public mark to organize a public presence in the city. In social

discourse, visibility and materiality is a way to gain awareness, understanding, recognition, and control. These elements are essential in understanding the material and the immaterial as a mode for visibility revealed to territoriality, where knowledge determines an adequate definition of visible and its social background (see Brighenti 2010). Visibility is a social medium for communication of information to one which perceives the representation of that information. In terms of the visibility of religious presence or absence, this medium permits groups to organize their power in the urban spaces. As Brighenti discussed the transparent characteristic of visibility, he mentioned that the vision of something (ideas) occurs by having a vision through something (the material sign): "Vision of something through something" (2010: 13-14). Visibility as a social domain requires producing perception and knowledge, which characterize recognition or misrecognition of the social group and their actions (Brighenti 2010: 37-38). Brighenti distinguished three types of visibility: 1. Visibility of recognition – adopting Hegelian concepts, he discusses that the human being is constructed by mutual recognition where one's self-consciousness should be recognized by the others. There increases another issue of assuming the visibility and its correctness – "The adopted criteria of correctness are far from irrelevant, and in fact they constitute the stake of several political struggles for recognition. At any rate, besides the diversity of criteria of correct visibility, a fairly general effect can be observed: beneath the lower threshold, a person is socially excluded" (Brighenti 2010: 47). 2. Visibility of control – it is connected to the first model of visibility as recognition, where the power is interwoven to the visibility and more strongly to invisibility. He conceives "power as a form of external visibility (visibility of effects) associated with inner invisibility (invisibility of identification): the effects of power are visible to all, but what power is in its essence, and where it really resides, will not be revealed" (Brighenti 2010: 48). 3. Visibility of spectacle – the regime separated from every-

day life. It encompasses a set of images that are detached from everyday life but serve as an ideological form of unity (Brighenti 2010: 46-49). Visibility and territoriality are essential for visual attention as a mode of social recognition that encloses visual communication and implementation of power, which is a predominately political process for diversity configuration in the public area determined by the influences of the majority (Brighenti 2010: 57-58). Visuality as a model for social recognition could favour social group to gain symbolic legitimization and socio-economic status. Saint-Blacant & Cancelleri (2014) argue that for religious communities, real estate is a way of demonstrating a "spatial power" where accessibility, temporary appropriation and visibility are involved in spatializing religion. The public as a mode of visibility embodies territoriality which is characterized by a complex social discourse that encompasses material and mental dimensions of the social organization. "The public appears when a certain urban site is turned into a venue of a 'public address', as an attempt to reach a dispersed public of personally unknown yet significant recipients. Every form of address to a public thus entails imagining a public to be addressed" (Brighenti 2010:126). Organizing social behaviour and constructing symbolic areas could be essential for minority groups. In terms of activities organizing religious presence in the city throughout religious architectures, public performances, et cetera, small religious communities could struggle finding ways for visual survival – to establish a visual, public presence in the urban space; Burchardt and Giera argue that (2020) "doing religious space" includes spatiality (for localizing the absence and presence of actors), materiality (for showing how religious actors materialize the space), rituality (to understand how religion is demonstrated in public symbolically) and governmentality (legal regulations and their administrations that determine expressing the religiosity in public). To this extent, religious spatiality embodied in territoriality is understood as a mode for the community to present itself in the concrete territory

characterized by the competition with the other religious organizations to attract and maintain believers. The competition for spatial presence converts pluralism from the religious into an ideological concept, which characterizes the competition or symbolic control of space (see Harvieu-Lager 2002: 101). In this sense, urban religious place-making is a political instrument that could shape the religious imagination of the city where dominant and other religious groups compete or coexist together. The religious imagination of the city, diversity and marked secularism constantly transform into symbolic and religious materializations which manifest themselves in buildings, dress, sounds, rituals, and performances; this urban spatial context of religiosity is called iconic religion (Knot et al. 2016). Considering the approaches of Knot, Krech and Mayer (2016) the attention of the researchers towards religiosity and their materiality in the urban area has been characterized by the constant flows of migrants in Europe. In terms of searching for the place of residences, migrants strain to organize the new religious spaces in the old and new religious architectures. By organizing their presence in cities through religious architectures and public religious celebrations they symbolically legitimize and mark the “our space” in urban area. In the post-Soviet space, there is a need to organize new and old religious buildings, thus visibility and materiality have been characterized by the re-emergence of religious activities in the public area where dominant and minority religious communities tensely organize their sacred identities in the public landscapes of the cities.

The religious landscape in Batumi

The port city of Batumi is a religiously diverse area where Orthodox Christianity (Georgian, Greek and Russian), Islam, Armenian Christianity, Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, et cetera determine the visual identity of the city. The current city-centre represents the meeting place of different religious architectures, principally constructed at the end of the nineteenth and the

beginning of the twentieth centuries. Batumi, as a central area of the region of Adjara, was a centre that demonstrated political power with its history of Ottoman, British, Russian Tsarists, and Soviet occupations. During their presence in the region, the governors through history used the religion and architectural presence in Batumi to demonstrate their power in the city, the region and the state.

Since the sixteenth century, when the Ottomans were leading Adjara and Batumi, Islam predominantly occupied the everyday public and private arenas in the majority of the city. The very first mosque in the city was constructed in the 1830s. Called Akhmed-Phasha's (named after the vice-governor of the region Akhmed Khimshiashvili) Jamie, it was burned down in the 1890s. The locals constructed a new mosque called Orta Jamie (the Jamie which is traced between the other two mosques) in the 1890s. The third mosque in Batumi was Assisie's Jamie (as Sultan Assis 1871-1876 claimed to have a new mosque in Batumi), which was a military mosque for the Turkish soldiers. The fourth mosque was constructed in the city in 1870 by Mufti and was destroyed in 1973 (Kvachadze 2011).

In 1878 the Russian Tsarism reunited Adjara to Georgia. In 1878 Batumi declared the status of Porto Franco as England required: The city and port fostered foreign-economic relationships by maintaining duty-free customs and goods. This status was annulled in 1886. In 1888 Emperor Alexander III visited Batumi and established a new Russian architectural cathedral called “Soboro” (named after saint Alexander Nevsky) which was symbolic evidence to demonstrate the Russian presence in the city and region. The emperor used religious architecture in the city to demonstrate the power that occupied a central role in the history of Batumi, where religious minorities were permitted to construct sites for religious devotions as well. The Ottomans permitted Orthodox Christians to have a Greek-Georgian site for religious devotion, which was constructed in 1865-1878. Greeks arrived in Batumi in the 1860s. The Russian Empire allowed Arme-

nians, Jews, and Catholics to construct places for religious services. The Jewish synagogue was constructed in 1904 and the Armenian church was constructed in the 1890s. In the second half of the nineteenth century, France was interested in the territory of Batumi; French businessmen were communicating with the local Catholic Armenians, which composed the majority of the Christians in the city. They supported the Armenians to construct an Armenian-Catholic church in Batumi (Jibashvili, Diasamidze 2013: 85-89).

Protestant churches established themselves in the city in the 1880s. The first protestant community was Evangelical-Lutheran. The adherents, consisting of about twenty-five people, were Germans working in Batumi who rented a private place for religious devotions. The anti-German rhetoric during and after the First World War led the German protestants to leave the city. The first Baptists arrived in Batumi from Russia in the 1890s, so they were ethnically Russians. In 1909 the community had twenty-five to thirty adherents. The Evangelical-Baptist community registered in Batumi in 1947. The adherents were Russians, Ukrainians, few Georgians and Jews. All Baptists prayed in a privately rented room. The first Pentecostals arrived in Batumi from Kazakhstan in 1959. In 1971 the adherents were up to 140-150, and were ethnically Russians and Ukrainians (Kopaleishvili 2013: 99-105).

Under Ottoman and Russian leadership, the presence of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the city had been diminished. The Russian Orthodox church deprived the Georgian Orthodox Church of having autocephalous status in 1811 (gained in 486 AD). To demonstrate its power, the Russian Orthodox Church constructed Russian architectural buildings called "Soboro" in all the big cities of Georgia. The Russian "Soboro" in Batumi was a symbol of the power of the Russian Orthodox Church in Batumi shortly after it rejoined Georgia. During Russian Tsarism, Batumi was under the interests of foreign Catholic businessmen. Together with Georgian Catholics that migrated from southern Georgia, and with the support of Georgian Businessmen, the Zubalashvili family,

Catholics constructed the Latin-Catholic Church in Batumi.

After the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia (1917), Georgia regained independence (1918) and the Georgian Orthodox Church regained independence in 1917¹. When the Soviet system was established in Georgia and militant secularism (Pelkmans 2009) was declared the official religious discourse, all religious groups in Batumi experienced oppression and the domestication of their religious activities in public areas. The term domestication of religious practice from public areas concerns the idea of shifting the religious arena from the exterior/public to the interior/private space (see Dragadze 1993:144). The Armenian Apostolic Church constructed in the 1890s was closed and restored as a planetarium, which was replaced in 1989 by a video salon/store. In the 1930s, Assisie's mosque and the Russian Soboro were destroyed and were replaced by a new park and hotel. The big synagogue was closed, as well. Jews conducted their religious observations in apartments. Protestants prayed in private places, as well. In the 1930s, the Orta Jamie Mosque was closed (and re-opened in the 1940s). Religious devotion in the Catholic church was replaced by an electric power plant, which led Catholics to pray in a private house.

As Soviet politics diminished, Batumi transformed and, since the 1980s, became a place for religious tensions concerning the ownership of religious places in public areas of the city. Pelkmans (2009: 2) argues that religious life after socialism can be characterized as a revival of repressed religious traditions. The religious revival after the Soviet collapse in Batumi has vividly determined the identity of the city. The population in Batumi was Christian until the seventeenth century, and the majority of them adopted Islam under Ottoman leadership. Since

¹ The Russian Orthodox Church recognized the autocephalous status of the Georgian Orthodox Church in 1927 and 1943, and the Ecumenical Patriarchate granted autocephalous status to the Georgian Orthodox Church in 1990.

the end of the 1980s, the Georgian Orthodox Church regained power. Membership of the Georgian Orthodox Church became popular among Georgian society, as Orthodox Georgian Christianity was associated as a national attribution. Thus, since the second half of the 1980s, Georgian Muslims of Adjara have massively converted to Orthodox Christianity (see Pelkmans 2009: 2). The urban religious transformation in Batumi started in the very late years of the Soviet Union, when the local government assigned the former Catholic cathedral to the Georgian Orthodox Church. During Soviet times, the Saint Nicolas Church was the cathedral of the Georgian Orthodox Church. Currently, the Georgian Orthodox Church owns the Saint Barbare church as well, which was constructed in 1888 in the old part of Batumi, which was used as a hospital during Soviet times. In 1996 the government of the city assigned the building to the Georgian Orthodox Church.

During the post-Soviet transformation and the religious revival that ensued, the spatial visibility of monumental architecture and its massive appearance in public areas demonstrated the power in the city that was permitted by the political authorities of Batumi. Since the last decade of communism, the legally claimed secularism affected the urban landscape of Batumi – public areas became formally neutral, which strongly resonates to demonstrate the power of the religious majorities. In contemporary Batumi, several religious groups live together. According to the information of the State Agency for Religious Issue of Georgia, 152,839 citizens live in Batumi. Considering the total number of citizens, 105,004 are Orthodox Christians, 38,762 are Muslims, 916 are members of the Armenian Apostolic Church, 102 are Catholics, 111 are Jehovah witnesses, 24 are Yezidis, 55 are Hebrews, and 7,866 pertain to other religions. Officially, Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Catholic Christians, the Armenian Apostolic Church, Jews, Jehovah Witnesses, the Church of the Gospel Faith, and the Holy Trinity Protestant Church have registered religious sites of devotion (<https://religion.gov.ge>).

Since the 1990s, the Georgian Orthodox Church has renovated old religious buildings as well as built new ones. Besides the churches, crosses and shrines can be seen on Batumi's streets. These signs symbolise the religious identity of the neighbourhoods.

In the old part of Batumi, Muslim Ortha Jamie is considered one of the central meeting places for Muslims. Around the mosque there are Turkish restaurants and markets for Islamic religious items. During Soviet times, people lived on the second floor of the mosque. In 1991, the government paid money to the residents to leave the building. At present, Muslims desire to construct a new mosque in the city, as well. In 2014, the office of Mufti was officially registered as a public entity that officially advocates communication between Muslims and the state.

Jews in Batumi have reconstructed an old synagogue in the city which is incorporated in the international Jewish tourist route to Israel. The small synagogue used for devotions during Soviet times was gradually destroyed, but the ruins remained.

In 1992 the building of the Armenian Apostolic Church transformed into the Armenian eparchy.

As Catholics did not have a building for worship in the public area of the city, they established a new one in 1999. Among protestant communities, the Holy Trinity Protestant Church is one of the well-known protestant religious buildings in the city; they have a Facebook page, have registered the site of religious devotions, et cetera, which makes this church a meeting space for the locals and visitors. The following section will focus on the contemporary situation of the materiality and visibility of the Catholic and Holy Trinity Protestant sites of religious devotions.

Post-Communist Religious Re-configuration of Catholic and Protestant Religious Organizations in Batumi

Since the end of the 1980s, religious buildings and signs have occupied the public landscape of Batumi. Through visibility and materiality in concrete territories, religious groups demonstrated

that their religious building in the public area of the city determines urban religious diversity and the multi-religious status of Batumi. The process was not a negotiation between religious groups and officials. Rather, it was a competition for public recognition of their identities. In this process, the major religious organizations influenced the shape of urban religious infrastructures through a negotiation with city officials. Nevertheless, religious minorities have found niches to materialize their presence in the city. In several circumstances, processes of co-organizing multiple religious identities in post-communist cities fostered tensions between different religious groups mostly at the official level. The tense spaces in the central parts of the city were historical, where religious public visibility has traditionally been materialized. To this extent, the small religious communities of Catholics and Protestants in Batumi needed to organize their religious “domains” (Brighenti 2010). Material architecture for small communities in post-atheist discourse was a mode of recognizing their visibility by the local officials and other religious communities. As the former Catholic church was given to the Georgian Orthodox Church, and the small community did not have an official representative from the Vatican in the state, Catholics in Batumi could not negotiate to reclaim the historical religious building. As soon as the Vatican established eparchy in the region, the negotiation with the local government and Catholic religious leaders succeeded and a decision was made to build a religious site of worship in the public space. The act of establishing a new site for worship was an act of place-making by keeping the mental connections with the former site of devotions which used to better materialize their visibility in the city, even during Soviet times when everyone recognized the building as the Catholic Cathedral. Through establishing the Holy Trinity church in the public space of the city Batumi, which marks their religious domain, the Protestants of Batumi demonstrate the legitimacy of the presence of Protestants to the officials and to the other religious communities (Protestants mostly). As

Protestants in Batumi are challenged to be unified due to urban shrinkage, the adherents of the Holy Trinity Church claim to be a place for all Protestants. By organizing religious sites of worship, all religious groups demonstrate their presence in the city which characterize the urban religious identity of Batumi as a multi-religious place. In what follows, I more closely analyse these two minority groups.

The Presence of Catholics in Batumi

The Catholics of Batumi migrated from Samtskhe and Javakheti (Southern Georgia) mostly during the nineteenth century. Besides Georgians, Armenian Catholics lived in Batumi and constructed the first Catholic church in the city. Soviet religious politics reshaped the Catholic community in Batumi. This determined the Post-Soviet public religious reconfiguration. Traditionally, the Catholics of Batumi had two places of worship. The first was a Catholic church which was constructed in the 1880s and was an Armenian-Catholic sanctuary. During Soviet times, the building was used as a sports gym. The second Catholic site of worship was the gothic building of the Holy Mother Virgin Nativity Cathedral, constructed at the end of the nineteenth century by the Zubalashvili family. The Cathedral was a place for Latin-Catholic² devotion. In Soviet times, the Holy Mother Virgin Nativity Cathedral was used for different purposes, but not as a space for religious activities. The Catholics of Batumi did not have a religious site in the public space of the city. Since the 1980s, due to a religious revival and the emerging nationalistic rhetoric in Georgia, the freedom of religion —understood as rights for major religious organizations to reconfigure their public identity in the cities— was established. The local government gave both Catholic buildings to the Georgian Orthodox Church. The Georgian Orthodox Church has owned the Batumi Armenian-Catholic church since 2000.

² While opening the Holy Mother Virgin Nativity Cathedral, the Latin-Catholics and Armenian-Catholics used to share the same Armenian-catholic church (Natsvlishvili 2019: 132).

The roof of the building is collapsed. The leader of the Armenian-Apostolic Church in Batumi, father Ararat³, stated that if the Georgian Orthodox Church gave the Armenian-Catholic church to the Armenian diaspora of Batumi, they would renovate the building. The building is unused, and it is difficult to identify where it is located and what its function is/was. For the Catholics in Batumi, this building is not as important as the building of the Holy Mother Virgin Nativity Cathedral, which had special significance for Georgian Orthodox Christians, as well. The first reason which characterised the importance of the cathedral for all the Christians in the city is its history; since the sixteenth century, the Ottoman Empire occupied the city. Batumi was occupied by the Ottomans until 1878, so the construction of the Batumi Holy Mother Virgin Nativity Cathedral was associated with the “triumph” of Christianity in the region. Zakaria Chichinadze (1903: 13) wrote that the construction of the Catholic church in Batumi had symbolic meaning for the city, which was occupied by the Muslim Ottoman Empire and was finally returned to Christianity. He assumed the new Christian building would remind the Muslims of their Christian past, even though it was not a traditional Georgian Orthodox Christian church.

The second reason which characterized the importance of the cathedral for all Christians of the city is the film “Monanieba”⁴ (Repentance), which was recorded at the Batumi Holy Mother Virgin Nativity Cathedral during Soviet times. In the last decade of the Soviet Union, when nationalistic feelings were emerging in Georgia, the Cathedral adopted special significance for everyone due to the film. This movie is about political and ideological changes; hence the Holy Mother Virgin Nativity Cathedral has symbolic meanings of moving away from the Soviet system and in direction of democratization. This was the principal motive for citizens of Batumi in the second half of the 1980s to start a movement for

renovating the damaged construction. As Catholics did not have many adherents in Batumi, the Georgian Orthodox Church got involved in the process of maintaining the building, something which generated tensions between Catholics and Orthodox Christians. When the construction was damaged in the 1980s, the Orthodox and Catholic Christians asked the government to take the electric-power plant away from the building. The Soviet officials took the plant away and repaired the building, but then decided to open an orchestra hall. The Catholics of Batumi collected the signatures for reopening the Catholic Cathedral in the building. Nonetheless, the Council of Ministers of the Autonomous Socialist Republic of Adjara ceremonially gave possession of the building to the Georgian Orthodox Church. One of my informants indicated that:

“As the nationalistic ideology was associated with Orthodox Christianity, no one complained about the event, which the government and the Georgian Orthodox Church committed in the case of the Cathedral. Catholics were protesting the negotiation of the government and the Georgian Orthodox Church, but the protest would not reverse the arrangement. Nowadays, if they consent that the building belongs to the Catholic community, I am sure it will be a reason for religious conflict in Batumi because radicals would be against that”.

The Catholics did not have strong relationships with the Vatican and they did not have a public religious place so, in post-Soviet times, the Catholics of the city actively demanded possession of the historical building of the Catholic Church in Batumi. The reconfiguration of the religious identity of Catholics in Batumi was accomplished after declaring the independence of Georgia. It was a time when an official relationship was established between Georgia and the Vatican. Since that period, the involvement of religious buildings of Catholics in the urban landscape of Batumi have been discussed between the Autonomous Republic of Adjara and the Bishop of the Vatican. As Catholics could not take the historic building back, the process for organizing public religious visibility in the city turned into the need to organize a new place for demonstrating pub-

³ Priest of the Armenian-Apostolic Church.

⁴ The director of the film is Tengiz Abuladze. It was released in 1984.

lic presence in the city. Political discourse and actions led to the Georgian Orthodox Church to become the owner of the Holy Mother Virgin Nativity Cathedral during the very late period of Soviet times, which forced Catholics to make new places, which would establish their current presence in the city. Nevertheless, the old icons and the oral memories of the adherents have allowed Catholics to maintain a connection with the historic site of worship.

When the bishop (Giuseppe Pasotto) of the Catholic Administration of the Caucasus was appointed in 1995, Catholics in Batumi were actively negotiating with the government to acquire an official site of worship. In addition to these discussions, Bishop Giuseppe attempted to negotiate with the Georgian Orthodox Church, as well. In an attempt to recognize the religious visibility of Catholics in Batumi, he asked the Georgian Orthodox Church to give back the Holy Mother Virgin Nativity Cathedral as long as they needed it, and promised to return the building to the Catholics in the future. Since the Georgian Orthodox Church did not accept, the religious figures from the Georgian Orthodox Church argued that the old cathedral which was built by the Georgian businessmen, the Zublashvilis brothers, was constructed when the power of the Georgian Orthodox Church had been diminished. As Catholics could not negotiate for the traditional sanctuary, they discussed establishing a new site of worship with the local government. Since 1995, Catholics led by Bishop Giuseppe Pasotto and the newly appointed Priest of Batumi, Gabriele Bragantini (who arrived in Georgia from Italy with Bishop Pasotto), discussed having a new site of religious devotion with the head of the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara – Aslan Abashidze (1991-2004). They negotiated the construction of a new sanctuary downtown, one of the central entrances to the city; the construction started in 1999 and was completed in 2000.

The church opened on January 24th, 2000, and was called the Batumi Holy Spirit Catholic Basilica (Kutateladze 2019: 602). The Holy Spirit Basilica

was one of the first buildings with a contemporary architectural style constructed in post-Soviet Batumi. The interior is plain and austere with frescoes. In the space behind the altar, there are private working offices and conference rooms. The church has three floors. On the ground floor there is a conference room which currently is a shared site of worship of one of the Protestant groups of Batumi. The space is open to visitors. The owner of the building works in the Catholic Administration of the Caucasus. The adherents of Batumi Holy Spirit Basilica are citizens of Batumi or neighbouring villagers. The number of adherents is approximately one hundred people, the majority of whom are ethnically Georgians, but there are Armenians as well. Due to the economic decay in Georgia in the 1990s, a lot of Catholics emigrated abroad. Father Gabriele Bragantini serves the Catholics of Batumi, Kutaisi and Ozurgeti. Since he leads several Catholic churches in the different cities in west Georgia, the religious devotions and holiday celebrations are shifting.

Batumi reshaped the urban landscape after the “Rose Revolution” (2004). The third President of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili (2004-2013), aimed to transform Batumi into one of the most attractive touristic areas in the state. His renovation projects changed the image of the city. Since the Batumi Holy Spirit Basilica has postmodern architecture, he wanted the religious building to become a tourist destination. He wished to establish a Catholic Cultural Centre in the Batumi Holy Spirit Basilica to demonstrate to the locals and the visitors that Georgia and Batumi inherited their European past, as demonstrated by the presence of Catholics and the traditional communication with the Vatican. Saakashvili’s idea was never realized, as he lost both elections in 2012 and 2013.

The Batumi Holy Spirit Catholic Basilica has a tight connection with the former Catholic Church of Batumi not only due to the memories of its adherents, but for its material and symbolic connections, as well. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Father Anselmo Mgebrishvili

bought small statues for the Holy Mother Virgin Nativity Cathedral. Those were polychromic plaster statues of angels, the Holy Mother, Jesus Christ, the Christmas stall, and scenes of the Passion of Christ. Those statues used to hang up on the walls of the former Catholic cathedral until Soviet times. The Soviet officials of Batumi gave those statues to the local museum. The museum gave them back to the Catholic community in 2005 and they are now kept at the Batumi Holy Spirit Catholic Basilica (Kutateladze 2019: 604; Natsvlishvili 2019: 147). The old icons currently hang at the entrance of Holy Spirit Basilica, in the office of the priest, and at the conference halls. Catholics had fourteen old icons that depicted Christ's fourteen Stages of the Cross. Catholics have maintained ten statues; four of them were lost during Soviet times. The Catholics of Batumi made miniature copies of those statues which are installed on the walls of the Basilica, to remember and remind the others that their presence in the city has historical roots, and the tradition continues at the newly established Holy Spirit Catholic Basilica.

The Presence of Protestants in Batumi

Through the history of the Protestant groups in Batumi, which dates back to the nineteenth century, they did not have a site of worship in the public space of the city. The Lutherans attempted to have a building in Batumi and negotiated with the government of the city from 1899-1902. Finally, their request was rejected, as an appropriate space for the construction of the building could not be found in the city (Kopaleishvili 2013: 100). Opposite to the other protestant groups in Batumi, who were renting a place for religious devotions, Pentecostals who migrated from Kazakhstan bought a private place in the 1970s, which still remains open (Kopaleishvili 2013: 104). Currently, the church of Pentecostals of Batumi represents a brunch of Evangelical Faith Church of Georgia centred in Tbilisi. The other Protestant groups have never had a place of worship during the pre-Soviet and Soviet times. In the 1990s, the number of adherents of the Protestant churches

increased. During Soviet times, the majority of parishes consisted of congregants that were ethnically Russian or Ukrainian; in post-Soviet times, Georgians were actively involved in Protestant religious activities, as well. After the 1990s, the number of parishes decreased due to economic decay and emigration from the city. The stable adherents of Protestant communities are mostly people from ethnically mixed families. One of the famous Protestant group in Batumi is the Holy Trinity Protestant community, which was established in 1995. The church inherited Pentecostal traditions and used to share the private site of worship with the Catholics of Batumi. Due to decreasing number of Protestant adherents and the desire to have an independent church in the city, they did not unify with the Evangelical Faith Church of Georgia and claimed to be the church not only for that particular community but for all Protestants of Batumi.

The post-Soviet religious revival of Protestant communities in Batumi is the unambiguous process of public religious place-making where the strategy of the Holy Trinity Protestant Church for claiming their presence is represented by the establishment of an independent Protestant Church for all Protestants in the city; this is something unique for Batumi. Even for the media and local officials, communication with Protestants takes place in the church of the Holy Trinity. Contrary to the strategy of Catholics and their long process of negotiation with the city government, the Protestants' process of materializing their public presence in the city via the visibility of the place of worship was different. They decided to organize the religious site in the city in a private house. In the 1990s, the number of adherents was around thirty to thirty-five people. Currently, the community consists of 150 members. The Protestant church does not have a hierarchy, nor a bishop. The leader of the community is Varl'm Ramishvili, who established the Holy Trinity Protestant Church of Batumi in 1995.

The territorial visibility of the community in the public space of Batumi started on private property. The adherents bought the house where

they have officially established the Holy Trinity Protestant Cathedral, which was the original community in the city. The community renovated the building at their own expense. The building is located in downtown Batumi and is marked on tourist maps. The church has a courtyard isolated from the street. The exterior of the building looks like a private house rather than a church. The interior is refurbished with religious items. The reception, kitchen and several rooms are on the first floor of the building and the second floor has several restrooms where guests travelling to the church from other cities and states may stay. The building is not only a place for devotion; it is also an educational and meeting centre for the members of the Holy Trinity Protestant Church. The space for religious devotion, however, is in the biggest room on the first floor, which is isolated from the other rooms. The members of the community are ethnically Georgians as well as Armenians, and Russians. The devotions are bilingual: They are done both in Georgian and Russian. The strategy to organize the presence of Protestants in the city and request their recognition differs from that of the other religious groups in the city. By declaring its uniqueness in Batumi and transforming the private property into the site of religious devotion, the newly established Protestant group became dominant in relation to the other protestant groups of the city.

Conclusion

The analysis of the organization of sites of worship in Batumi shows that there are different ways post-Soviet religious plurality relate to the public urban space. Two religious organizations and their involvement in the urban space of Batumi show the different ways religious communities have chosen to insert themselves in the urban landscape. These approaches resonate with the activities that the dominant religious community applies to demonstrate their presence in the city through religious architecture and ownership of historical buildings. The way these two minority groups demonstrate their public religious identity is a spontaneous representation of the

multi-religious identity of Batumi. Those small Christian religious communities (Catholic and Protestant) must navigate how to be recognized and contest the powers of Orthodox Christians and Muslims in the city. Ownership of a religious organization in the city is a potential contact area with the other religious groups.

The visibility of the different religious groups in the city is legitimized by the recognition of the power of the discourse-maker major religious community (the Georgian Orthodox Church). The Georgian Orthodox Church becomes a powerful urban actor in Batumi and maintains a special position in urban public spaces. It is a result of the Ottoman, Russian Tsarist, and Soviet religious oppressions which diminished the status of the Georgian Orthodox Church and the other religious communities in Batumi. In post-Soviet times, the Georgian Orthodox Church has revived its power by increasing in popularity among the Georgian society and gaining political support. The organization of Power of the Georgian Orthodox Church shapes the strategies minority religious organizations adopt to mark sites of worship in the public area, since the latter is formally neutral but strongly resonates with the “requirements” of the religious majority. For this reason, the strategy of organizing religious sites of devotion for small religious groups (Catholic and Protestant) is a component of the politics of recognition which symbolically determine “The fight for survival by organizing the religious domain” (Burchardt and Griera 2020). Through visibility and materiality in concrete territories, Christian minorities demonstrate to the citizens of the city that their public presence constitutes the urban religious diversity and the multi-religious status of post-Soviet Batumi.

In their negotiations with the government to organize their presence in the city, the Christian religious minorities (Catholic and Protestant) adopted different strategies: Catholics organized their religious sites in post-Soviet Batumi by negotiating with the politicians of the city when the official relationships were established between Georgia and the Holy See. In the case of the Prot-

estants, they used private resources to establish a new organization in Batumi which began in a private house and became a religious site; locals currently agree and accept this place as the mark of the Protestants of Batumi. Considering the concepts of Brighenti (2010) and the work of the above-mentioned authors about visibility, territoriality, religious place-making – which draw public marks of the religious organizations and make ideas and concepts understandable for everyone (Brighenti 2010, 13) – we can argue that the visibility and materiality of the religious groups, by means of its religious architecture, resemble the religious identity of the city where power, public organization, legitimation, and unification circulate the power of the major discourse makers. To this extent, religious architecture favors groups to gain recognition of their presence in the city (see Saint-Blancat & Cancellieri 2014). The cases of the Georgian Orthodox Church, and the Catholic and Protestant organizations of Batumi demonstrate that place-making in the urban area is a political instrument that shapes the imagination of the city, by which symbolic demonstrations of power publicly resonate with the strategies (constructing a new church by involvement of the religious and city officials in case of Catholics, and transforming private place into public mark of religious devotions in Protestants case) of the religious communities in Batumi.

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“They are like Georgians but bigger”: The Perceptions of Chinese Businesspeople in Georgia

by SUSANNE FEHLINGS (Frobenius Institute for Research in Cultural Anthropology at Goethe University Frankfurt am Main)

Abstract

This article looks at Georgians’ perception of Chinese businesspeople in Tbilisi. Although Chinese communities can be found almost everywhere across the globe – including in the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, Western Europe, Russia, Central Asia, the Americas, South and East Asia, etc. – the Chinese presence in the Caucasus is a relatively new phenomenon. My analysis of case studies in Georgia, where the Urumqui-based Hualing Group is perhaps most powerful Chinese investor, *challenges* the assumption that differences between groups predominately create conflict and mistrust. It also challenges the hypothesis that trade and business networks is built on cooperation of ethnic and religious ties and communities. Instead, it gives examples of how common economic interests and shared social practices create a mutual understanding, and how this understanding is explained and experienced by Georgians.

Keywords: interethnic exchange, trust, mistrust, entrepreneurship, informality, Belt Road Initiative (BRI), Caucasus, Georgia, Global China

Introduction

Since the early 1990s, Chinese investors and traders have begun to migrate or sporadically come to the Caucasus for business. The first Chinese that appeared in the region were representatives of the People’s Republic’s state-owned companies; they were thus delegates of national state interests. Since the early 2000s, however, Chinese private traders and investors became more visible— especially in Georgia. Here, the largest Chinese foreign investor is currently the Urumqui-based Hualing Group, which, since 2007, has invested more than 500 million USD in different economic branches in the country. The company processes wood, has established a free industrial zone in Kutaisi, has purchased controlling shares in Georgia’s Basis Bank in 2012 and has built the Youth Olympic Village and a housing area called Hualing City at the edge of the capital. In this article will focus on the perception of

Chinese businesspeople in the Caucasus with an emphasis on the recognition of Hualing Group.

This article is based on materials collected in Tbilisi between 2016 and 2020. While I was conducting the anthropological research project “Informal Markets and Trade in Central Asia and the Caucasus,” funded by the Volkswagen Foundation, I became interested in Hualing’s so-called *Hualing Sea Plaza*, which is a shopping centre flanked by a marketplace. According to Hualing’s website, these commercial facilities, which cover a territory of 150,000 square meters, will “become the largest wholesale and retail trading centre of Georgia and [the] whole Caucasus region and in future [...] will [...] [have] an important role [as a] wholesale, retail and distribution centre [...] [in the] Euro-Asian region”.¹

¹ Hualing “Tbilisi Sea Plaza”: <http://hualing.ge/language/en/tbilisi-sea-plaza/>.

For the last several years, my primary research interest has been the Georgian bazaar trade and the trade links between Georgian (and other post-Soviet) bazaar traders and China. As I observed the exchange and relationships between Georgian and Chinese traders in the so-called Russian Market in Beijing, the presence of Chinese traders and investors in the local bazaar scene in the Caucasus, though not my main research topic, caught my attention. Starting from the marketplace (Hualing Sea Plaza), I tried to understand the Chinese's activities and role in the Georgian trading sector. My insights, however, first of all reflect my Georgian interlocutors' perspective, who described their experiences with Chinese business partners and employers, as well as their views and interpretations of the actions and behaviours they observed.

All interlocutors quoted in this text worked for the Hualing Group. Although they were not traders, they all worked in the trading sector: as salespeople, as organizers of customs clearance or as managers in the Sea Plaza. Unlike other foreign investors, the Hualing Group, because of reasons explained below, is interested in the local bazaar sphere; it tries to cooperate with local bazaar traders and managers and pursues its own ambitions in this economic branch. Thus, although there are huge differences between traders classified as micro-entrepreneurs such as those I studied in local markets in the Caucasus and in Beijing and the local employees of Hualing Group and Hualing's Chinese investors, these different categories of people are linked through their involvement in the same economic branch. Examining my data, I ask which factors (ethnic, religious, social and cultural) shape the interactions of Georgian and Chinese individuals in this context.

Aiming at contributing to the broader discussion of this special issue, I also identify the role of religion in the described encounters. The fact that the Hualing Group is led by Muslim Uyghurs, is a curious one, which, I believe, should not be overinterpreted, but should be mentioned. Muslim Chinese are associated with trade practices

and Silk Road imaginaries. In ethnographic studies, they extend over large networks and often take on the role of mediators in intercultural exchange. At the same time, Uyghur's Muslim identity opposes China's state atheism, and ideology and has made them a target of surveillance and suppression (Erie 2016). Their appearance in the Caucasus is thus an interesting case. Here, they find themselves in an environment in which the Georgian Orthodox Church is one of the most powerful and most trusted institutions (Gurchiani 2017). In 2013, the Caucasus Barometer household survey revealed that 93% of the general public and 95% in the eighteen to thirty-five year age group regarded religion as important in their daily lives, and studies on religiosity in Georgia point to the strong links between the church and the state and between religion and national identity. Thus, this case study gives insights into a so far understudied interreligious encounter, which occurs in a relatively secular business sphere that is shaped by global capitalism, and a Chinese-led globalization, which has recently been implemented through the so-called Belt Road or New Silk Road Initiative.

The article gives an overview of the Chinese presence in the Caucasus. It discusses prejudices of the Chinese people in post-Soviet Eurasia and contrasts these prejudices with the descriptions of my Georgian interlocutors, who emphasize their good relationships with the Chinese Hualing Group. Within the described relationships, practices of hospitality, feasting, and gifting occupy an important place. Such practices are related to social, cultural and religious values, but practiced and applied in a separate secular sphere. Although my materials are far from being comprehensive and should be taken as a starting point for further research, I come to the preliminary conclusion that in this context shared social and economic practice serves to overcome potential conflicts.

Chinese in post-Soviet Eurasia and the Caucasus

In 2005, many years before my first trip to the Caucasus, I travelled with a friend from Mos-

cow to Murmansk. It was a long journey, and through the train's compartment window, we saw birch tree after birch tree for hours. When I complained about this panorama, I got a laconic response: "In ten years, additionally, under each birch tree, there will sit a Chinese". At the time I did not pay much attention to these words. Looking back, however, I think that this sentence expressed an observation – or an anxiety – which emerges everywhere, in which China or Chinese people show agency and emerge as a social, economic and political power. As Zhang and Saxer described: "'Rising China' – the nation, the notion, and the buzzword – sparks dreams and triggers fears" (2017: 11).

These dreams and fears have a particular history in Eurasia². Russian, Central Asian, Siberian and Chinese populations lived side by side for centuries and were involved in exchange and conflict. Alternately, coexistence led to cooperation, isolation or exclusion. In recent history, after

² The concept of "Eurasia" as defined by Chris Hann has triggered a heated debate. This debate is about whether or not the Eurasian landmass forms a unity and/or is shaped by "civilizational interconnectedness" (Hann 2016). Alessantro Testa, in response to Hann, argues that "apart from features and common developments – important as they may be – dating back to prehistoric or ancient times, the Silk Road, the welfare state and the age of real socialism, there is little keeping Hann's Eurasia united" (Testa 2017: 65). This might be true. But for bazaar, shuttle trade and transregional exchange, the mentioned periods are exactly the phases, which are perceived to have been most important and formative for the expanse of networks, the development of trade routes, for the adaptation of business practices, and for ideas (and imaginations) of connectivity. Because of their Soviet background, Caucasian traders are able to navigate post-Soviet shuttle trade. It is the breakdown of the Soviet Union that unites the trader community across Eurasia. At the same time, traders, businesspeople and state representatives often allude to the ancient past and Silk Road imaginaries to build bridges across national and ethnic borders, to justify foreign policies and to highlight their historical importance within the global order (Karrar 2018). This is why I believe that in this specific context of economic interaction – at least the contexts in which my interlocutors perceive as their social, cultural and economic environment – the "Eurasia" framework, as suggested by Hann, makes perfect sense.

a period of ideological consensus, the borders between the Soviet Union and Communist China were closed for about thirty years. Glasnost, perestroika, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union – as well as the reform era in China – then, resulted in a relaxing of these border regimes since the late 1980s (Humphrey 2018). In the 1990s it was relatively easy to get a visa to travel in both directions. Chinese as well as post-Soviet people including the first generation of my target group of Georgian traders, took it as a chance to forge shuttle-trade, which turned into a flourishing business (Fehlings 2017, Holzlehner 2014). Generally, goods moved in one direction: from China to bazaars in former Soviet territories (Humphrey 2018: 18, compare Nyíri 2007: 77-78). Thus, one could observe the proliferation of open-air markets, which were flooded with Chinese merchandize across Siberia, Central Asia, in Moscow, Odessa and the Caucasus (Fehlings & Karrar 2016). Simultaneously, Chinese labour force migrated to Russia. Chinese became visible as an ethnic minority and their presence started to trigger worries about an invasion of the so-called "yellow peril." The Russian government reacted to this thread with restrictions on legal migration (Namsaraeva 2018), but xenophobia remained an issue in Russia, as I witnessed first-hand when I studied in Moscow.

Unlike other parts of the world (Africa, America, Western Europe) – and unlike Russia – there is no long history of Chinese migration in the Caucasus. Liu Junzhou, who came to Georgia in 1890 and introduced and cultivated the first tea plants in the region of Adjara, is one of few exceptions. He and his family left the Caucasus in 1924, when the Soviets started to put pressure on him (Zhou 2012).³ It was only after the collapse of the Soviet Union that Chinese people really started to discover Georgia. But unlike other post-Soviet countries, which became attractive for Chi-

³ His family, who is quite famous in Georgia, maintained connections with the country (Zhou 2012) and until today symbolises the positive side of cultural exchange between Asia, Russia and the Caucasus.

nese migrants in the late 1980s and early 1990s⁴ (Nyíri 2011), Georgia did not number among the favoured destinations of Chinese migration. According to Zhou: “it is likely that without any initial network of Chinese, the country and its market were less accessible. It is also possible that Georgia was still too obscure and unknown, even for enterprising Chinese. Georgia was not yet a destination in itself, but it was briefly used as a stepping stone for Chinese migrants seeking entry into Europe proper” (Zhou 2020: 4).

However, meanwhile, different groups of Chinese migrants have established themselves or have found temporarily work in Georgia. These groups are: a) representatives and employees of Chinese state owned companies (usually construction companies), which operate under the New Silk Road Initiative; b) Chinese micro-entrepreneurs, most of whom come from the Zhejiang and Fujian provinces in south-eastern China. Those usually work as traders in a marketplace, which was founded in 2006 in proximity to “Lilo Bazoba”⁵; and, c) private investors and companies, one of which is Hualing Group (Fehlings 2019b, Zhou 2012). I will focus on the latter, on Hualing Group, which was founded by Mi Enhua, a businessman from Xinjiang.

As mentioned above, I became interested in Hualing Group because of its shopping mall and marketplace. Both are part of a huge building complex including housing sections, a hospital, a concert hall, a hotel, infrastructures and a customs terminal. In spring 2016, a few of my Georgian friends, colleagues and interlocutors had heard about Hualing City despite the fact that, at that time, it had already developed into a satel-

lite city that had been added to the periphery of Tbilisi’s urban landscape. This changed in autumn. All of a sudden the so-called New Silk Road Initiative, which was supported by the Georgian government, was widely discussed in the media and in public. The headlines also drew new attention to Hualing Group, which was now perceived as an agent of Chinese BRI policies and investment.

The New Silk Road, also called OBOR (One Belt, One Road) or BRI (Belt Road Initiative), has created a stir since it was first announced by Xi Jinping in his famous speech at the Nazarbayev University in Astana in May 2014.⁶ The BRI consists of a Chinese-led infrastructural and economic program, which can be seen as an attempt to implement the so-called “Chinese dream”. Usually, it is presented in maps, which highlight “economic corridors” that are symbolised as arrows spanning across the globe. The Caucasus, in these maps, is located on the so-called “China-Central Asia-West Asia Corridor”. From a historical perspective, this area has always been a transit zone that connected Europe and Asia (Kaczmarek 2016, Larsen 2017).

In Georgia, now, the BRI is first of all associated with infrastructural projects and the private activities of the Hualing Group. It is difficult to estimate Hualing’s involvement with state affairs (in China and in Georgia). Obviously, it has a privileged position. As mentioned, Hualing Group is based in Urumqi, the capital of the Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang. The company’s elite are Muslims. Its head, Mi Enhua, is a Hui, who came from Shandong province to Xinjiang as a child (Zhang & Alon 2009). According to the 2010 census, about twenty-three million Muslims have lived in China, including about 10 Million Uyghurs, most of whom settled in Xinjiang, in China’s Western borderlands in Central Asia.

⁴ Between 1989 and 1992 “economic and political anxiety in China” and “the collapse of state socialist regimes in Eastern Europe created economic and political conditions for Chinese immigration: a brief window of liberal immigration policies [...]” (Nyíri 2011: 145), which led to a mass movement towards Eastern Europe.

⁵ For reference, Lilo Bazoba is the biggest bazaar and trading hub in the Caucasus and, since the 1990s, it is a distribution centre for Chinese goods that are brought to the Caucasus by local Caucasian traders (Fehlings 2017, 2020).

⁶ A Summary of the speech has been published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/xjpfwzysiesgjtfhshzzfh_665686/t1076334.shtml; a video of the whole speech is available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHkNzMjEv0Y>.

Uyghurs are a Turkish-speaking ethnicity with a Central Asian background. Their written language is Persian. The majority of Uyghurs belong to the Hanafi-Sunni branch of Islam, although Sufi brotherhoods (Naqshbandi) are widespread and maintain many local shrines. After riots in 2009 Uyghurs have collectively been accused of terrorism and been object to many restrictions (Erie 2016: 8-10). In recent years, news related to Uyghur matters report on harassment and concentration camps. Albeit (or because of) their difficult situation, many Chinese Muslims, within the last decades, have taken advantage from China's open border policy and the New Silk Road Initiative. One of the goals of the BRI was to economically and politically integrate Xinjiang into broader China, which is why it was target to financial support. At the same time, Hui and Uyghurs, which were both traditionally involved in trade activity, in recent years, established themselves and their networks in all major trading centres in China and abroad. They took over key positions as mediators, for example between the PRC and the Arab World, and are sometimes called the "agents of Chinese globalization" (Wang 2018, compare Alff 2014, Erie 2016, Steenberg 2018).

In Georgia, the Uyghur presence might still be surprising. Uyghur trading networks outside of China seem to be best developed in Muslim countries and/or countries with an ethnic Turkish and Turkish-speaking population. But because of Xinjiang's proximity to Central Asia, Uyghurs were quickly involved in post-Soviet shuttle trade in the 1980s and 1990s. The Hualing Group was built upon the breakdown of the Soviet Union. Mi Enhua became rich because of the shortage of supply and the demand for building materials that followed the Soviet collapse (Zhang & Alon 2009). His clients were traders from post-Soviet countries, which is why Georgia, with its Soviet past and post-Soviet bazaar culture, must have seemed to be familiar terrain. This is perhaps the reason why Hualing, of all others, took on the role of a Chinese economic pioneer here. Meanwhile, Hualing's representatives act as mediators between locals and Chinese interest groups,

helping other Chinese companies to gain a foothold in the region.

Chinese markets in the local urban setting

In literature, encounters between the Chinese (in general) and people in Africa, Asia or Eurasia alike are frequently described as shaped by conflict (Lee 2014). A big issue, which has been debated in recent publications like in Humphrey's "Trust and Mistrust in the Economy of the China-Russia Borderlands" (2018) is the topic of trust – more precisely mistrust – in interethnic economic exchange (in general and with the Chinese). According to Humphrey, "If trust is the outcome of culturally specific performances, it will be doubly problematic in trans-border situations where there are radical differences in social strategies and ideas about what should be revealed and what hidden" (Humphrey 2018: 13). This is an often found argument.

The ethnographic literature on economic exchange between the Chinese and local populations in Eurasia can be divided into two interrelated subfields: 1) Works on so-called ethnic markets and 2) studies concerned with transnational trade. Chinese ethnic markets (markets organized and dominated by Chinese traders) first emerged in Russia, along the Chinese-Russian border in Siberia, in Central Asia and in big urban centres such as Irkutsk and Moscow. As reflected in the edited volume by Djatlov and Grigorichev (2015), Russian social scientists have been very active in investigating these fields. The research on transnational trade is concerned with trade networks, trading routes and so-called border markets. It includes, for example, studies on post-Soviet traders from Central Asia, the Caucasus or Russia working with the Chinese in China (Alff 2014, Fehlings 2020, Holzlehner 2014; Schröder 2020, Steenberg 2016), but also works on Hui Chinese merchants and businesspeople in the Arab world (Wang 2018), on Uyghurs trading between Central Asia and Xinjiang (Alff 2014, Steenberg 2016, 2018) and on Fujianese migrants in Hungary (Nyíri 2007, 2011). In both subfields (1 and 2) the topic of mistrust frequently emerges.

Many studies present data which support Humphrey's quote, and conclude that in exchange relationships, mistrust is often linked to perceptions of ethnic and religious difference, on the one hand, while trust is frequently associated with ideas of ethnic and religious homogeneity, on the other. In the context of international, long-distance and cross-border trade, exchange across ethnic and religious lines is almost unavoidable. As we can see in many ethnographic descriptions, traders with different backgrounds then find ways to overcome prejudices, to cooperate and to establish good relationships. During my research with Georgian traders, I witnessed positive interactions with Chinese partners in Beijing. However, Georgians were careful in trusting Chinese: "We know good people there. But there are also people you should not even talk to." Trust is thus limited and given on an individual basis. Trustworthy Chinese are rather perceived as exceptions "of their kind" because of their personal virtues. Accordingly, the Sino-Russian relationship, throughout history, has been characterized as complicated and shaped by mistrust -- unlike the relationship between Muslim Turk Uyghurs and Central Asians or Hui and Arabs, which is mostly described as rather trustful, a fact that is explained by interviewees with a mutual understanding deriving from a shared language, worldview, culture or religious background.

A result of mistrust, as described by Humphrey, is that Chinese (ethnic) markets in Russia have been "regarded by municipal authorities as 'crime-promoting spaces' and by the townsfolk as useful but alien closed enclaves" (2018: 23). The Chinese reaction is isolation: "Chinese traders lived and sheltered on site" and "were rarely venturing into the city for fear of xenophobic attacks" (Humphrey 2018: 23). According to Nyíri, because of the Chinese traders' "legal vulnerability to expulsion, they were inclined to take on economic roles or methods seen as deviant (such as usury). This led to an increased identification of the entire group with a particular business and the cementing of a view of it as an economic --

as well as a moral and a sanitary -- threat" (Nyíri 2011: 147).

In Georgia one can observe a similar phenomenon. The Chinese section of Lilo Bazroba that is, as mentioned earlier, a hub for Chinese migrants and micro-entrepreneurs from the Zhejiang and Fujian provinces, indeed, is an ethnic enclave with poor contact to the local Georgian population and the city. It is looked upon with suspect, it has a relatively bad reputation (regarding its sanitation), and I heard many prejudices about its Chinese traders, who are accused for "invading the country," "paying for marrying local woman to get a resident permit" and whose merchandise symbolizes bad, so-called "Chinese quality."

Hualing Sea Plaza, however, belongs to a totally different category. It represents China's modernity, superiority and economic potential. Its architecture and size is impressive, and the whole complex, to which the Plaza belongs, reflects "big money" and great ambition. Still, the Plaza and the market do not project a full success story. Since its opening it has been underutilized. Its corridors, as well as the parking lots in front of the market buildings, at least during my fieldwork, were empty, and the Georgian bazaar-traders working in the shopping mall complained about a lack of clients.

Hualing's market is, as mentioned, located on the outskirts of Tbilisi. It shares this position with many other marketplaces in Central Asia, Russia, Ukraine and the Caucasus -- with the Central Bazaar in Astana (Baitas 2019), Dordoi in Bishkek (Karrar 2017, Spector 2017), Sed'moi in Odessa (Humphrey & Skvirskaja 2009, Marsden 2018), Barakholka in Yerevan (Melkumyan 2017) and Lilo Bazroba (and the Chinese market nearby) in Tbilisi. Many such markets and bazaars "are characteristically located in a 'grey zone'" (Humphrey & Skvirskaja 2009: 62). According to Humphrey and Skvirskaya "in relation to the city, which is also commercialized, such a market is like a bad boy alter ego" (2009: 62). All across Eurasia one can observe, "attempts to contain the market and its influences from seeping into urban life" (Marsden, 2016: 35), because it represents

“oriental chaos” threatening urban order and modernity.

Hualing’s Sea Plaza and its market represent, again, a different case. They do not fit into the common image of a chaotic “oriental” bazaar. Still, it is even more marginalized. Unlike local bazaars, it is not just located on the periphery of the city, but on the periphery of local people’s mental maps. This, I suggest, reflects the position of Chinese businesspeople in Georgia and their exclusion from social networks. The marginalization of Chinese businesspeople, as my interlocutors explained, is due to many reasons. One is that Chinese have only recently started to do business in the Caucasus. But social networks are important to succeed. Therefore, Chinese businesspeople have to build trusting relationships.

Perceptions

In Georgia, like in Russia and other parts of the former Soviet Union, one can find plenty of prejudices against Chinese migrants and China, which provide a breeding ground for suspicion. But xenophobia, although it flares up on some occasions, is not a major concern here. Zhou, who provides a small survey of Chinese migration in Georgia, states that “Chinese businessmen, company employees and even restaurant workers generally report no problems dealing with Georgians or living in Georgian society” (2012: 14). There are some complains about Chinese’ low status within Georgian society, but there seems to be no significant evidence for systemic discrimination or targeted hate-crime (2012: 14).

Besides the above-mentioned prejudices, positive associations with China and Chinese exist, as well. In the 1980s and 1990s Chinese martial arts, films, medicine, mystics and philosophy became very popular among local youth. China was (and still is) admired for its old and rich civilization, which is compared to local pasts and societies. Armenians like to refer to Movses Khorenatsi, the author of the *History of Armenia*, who, in the fifth century BC wrote that the Mamikonyan family, which ruled big parts of Armenian territories

between the fourth and eighth century AD⁷, can be traced back to a Chinese ancestor: to Mamik, a family member of general Ma Chao, one of two brothers, who fled from China during the Three Kingdom’s period (220-280 AD) (Zhou 2012). Chinese are thus not categorically rejected, not even from local myths and genealogy, and one can find Chinese literature or literature on Chinese on many Caucasian bookshelves.

Physical attacks on Chinese, as mentioned, unlike in Russia, are an exception – and so is open conflict. In 2016 one of the few conflicts I heard about occurred. It concerned land rights and access to woods. In the media one could read that Georgian employees of a Chinese company (probably the Hualing Group) had helped the local villagers to “transport firewood” from the company’s premises and were therefore attacked with knives, truncheons and batons by the company’s Chinese workers⁸. According to my colleague Ketevan Khutsishvili, the incident caused a scandal and a boycott of Chinese goods but was forgotten a few weeks later.

As Chumburidze et al. (2016: 18) state, a limited share of the Georgian population is actually having personal contacts with foreigners. Opinions, as a rule, are formed on a rather theoretical level and based on second-hand information. This is also true for opinions on Chinese. My interlocutors, who worked with and for Hualing Group and who based their opinions on their own experiences, like most of the traders, who travelled to China, usually had a positive attitude towards their Chinese (Uyghur) partners and employers. In this Georgian context, this attitude was, as I understood, not confined to individual contacts but related to “the Chinese” in general. Local employees of Hualing Group knew that their employers came from Xinjiang province. They knew that they were Muslims.

⁷ The legends about and the genealogy of the Mamikonyan family is accessible on Wikipedia.

⁸ Vestnik Kavkaza “Police Detains Chinese Citizens for Attacking Georgian Workers”, 06.11.2016: <http://vestnikkavkaza.net/news/Police-detains-Chinese-citizens-for-attacking-Georgian-workers.html>.

But they referred to them as “the Chinese.” They did not differentiate between Han Chinese and Uyghurs. Instead, they distinguished different social or professional groups (traders, workers, businesspeople, and investors, for example). The first time I heard anyone talk about differences between the Han and Uyghurs and the Northern and Southern Chinese in Georgia was from a Chinese man, for whom these differences were essential.

Experiences

Georgian employees and partners of the Hualing Group emphasized that it was easy to work with “the Chinese.” The Chinese, as they said, were diligent and reliable partners and very competent entrepreneurs. But positive assessments did not stop at this point. My interlocutors even claimed that Georgians and Chinese had much in common. Instead of mistrust, they described an atmosphere of generalized trust and talked about relationships, which can be classified as friendship or at least as friendship-like (see Fehlings 2020).

Lasha, one of my interviewees, who managed custom clearance for the Hualing Group told me that he felt very comfortable with his Chinese bosses. He trusted them because they proved to trust him. Lasha was employed by Hualing because of his father’s hospitality towards Chinese employers, whom he had invited for dinner. Once Lasha attested to be an equally responsible employee as his father, his preliminary position was transformed into a permanent one. One of his Chinese bosses told him that he did not have to log-in his working hours, anymore, but could come and leave when needed and “work on trust.” Lasha reacted to this offer with working even more – much more than he was obliged to according to his work contract. Talking to me, he praised his Chinese superiors for creating a good working atmosphere. Lasha did everything to help Hualing. He managed the clearance of goods the company imported to Georgia and took over the paperwork and other administrative tasks. After a while, he told his bosses that

they should invite the customs officials for dinner, which was a step to establish a good relationship between Georgian officials and the Chinese investors. Lasha mediated between the two parties and thus fostered the integration of the Hualing Group into local networks. He hired a daughter of one of the custom officials and thus created new bonds. It worked. By sitting together at one table, trust began to form and Hualing faced less problems – at least with the local customs officials.

At the Sea Plaza, the Hualing Group organized an even bigger gala dinner for all the local contractors, the local Georgian bazaar traders included, who rented shops in the company’s shopping mall and marketplace. Commensality is a proven method to make friends. In Georgia such feasts of banquettes are called *supra*. Lilo Bazroba’s traders, to whom I talked about the gala dinner, as well as Lasha and his friend Irakli, were impressed by Hualing’s representatives’ readiness to participate in and to pay for such lavish feasting. The Georgian *supra* is a ritualized form of banqueting. It includes the consumption of a lot of wine and a strict sequence of toasts, which are spoken by the *tamada* (table master). Besides other things, the *supra* reflects social hierarchies, establishes and confirms good relationships and is associated with Georgian values linked to patriotism, masculinity, community and hospitality (Mühlfried 2007). Lasha and his friend Irakli both emphasized that their Chinese bosses did their best to adjust to this local custom. Sometimes, as Lasha told me with a certain pride, they even take over the part of the *tamada*. Even though they get drunk easily they do not refuse, as stressed out Lasha, the ritual consumption of alcohol, albeit the fact “that they are Muslims.” Lasha and Irakli took this as a sign of respect for Georgians and Georgian culture. But Lasha was most impressed when his Chinese boss appeared at the funeral of one of his relatives. His superior had travelled a long way in order to attend. Quoting Lasha: “He came to this province, far away from Tbilisi, he gave me money and he said ‘Lasha, write me

down in the book.' He even knew about this tradition!"

Mariam, another interviewee, who provided me with insights into the Hualing Group's policies, worked for the Sea Plaza as a sales manager and then as an operation specialist. She told me that she felt respected, was satisfied with the working conditions, and that the Plaza, for her, had become a second home. Her Georgian as well as her Chinese co-workers became close friends, and she was very sad when she had to leave the company for personal reasons. She remembered that her Chinese employers were very fair. She was well-paid by local standards, and overtime was always compensated. For the New Year and on the eighth of March (women's day) everyone received a present, which, as Mariam said, "makes you feel good and respected."

As an insider, Mariam knew about Hualing's ambitious plans to transform the Sea Plaza and the nearby marketplace into an important trading hub. According to her, Hualing initially tried to convince Lilo Bazroba's traders to move to Hualing's territories. Although the Hualing Group is the biggest Chinese investor in Georgia and is active in different economic sectors, it seems that it has not lost its original link to this specific kind of bazaar trade. The project, however, failed. But it did not fail because of prejudices about the Chinese or xenophobia. Lilo Bazroba's Georgian traders, especially those who travel to China regularly, are used to working with Chinese. It is because of their (positive) experiences with Chinese business partners that they opened small shops in the Plaza. But, as they explained, "clients are used to come to Lilo (Bazroba)." Traders rely on long-term relationships with co-traders and with clients – and these relationships and networks are embedded to Lilo Bazroba as a locality. Hualing has not yet established itself within these networks and commercial topography. It is marginalized in terms of contacts – it is not on the map. Still, Hualing started to negotiate about the transfer of another bazaar to the Plaza, "Eliava," which is a local bazaar specialized in building materials and spare parts.

Mariam mentioned that Hualing's bosses tried to improve their current situation by establishing good relationships with local traders and with the local elites, and that one way to do so was by offering gifts. Lasha gave me an example: "The bishop of Qazbegi wanted to do some renovations. He asked the President of Georgia what to do and then they approached Hualing Group⁹. Hualing Group agreed to support this project and brought materials for 300.000 USD from Turkey, which they simply gifted to the church. When there was the flood in Tbilisi in 2015, which destroyed parts of the city (Sabortalo) and the zoo, Hualing gifted 150.000 USD. Hualing even gifted some roads, but I forgot which one." Mariam concluded from such actions alluding to local bribing practices: "they (the Chinese) are like Georgians but bigger!"

The role of religion

The above-mentioned examples reveal Hualing's approach. My interlocutors, Lasha, Irakli, Mariam and others described that they felt trusted and respected. They described an atmosphere of mutual understanding and the Chinese's interest in and readiness to adapt to local traditions. Trust was thereby established on the personal level but then, apparently, went beyond this interaction and also shaped attitudes on a more abstract level.

As my insights are limited to the Georgian perspective, I cannot say much about how the Chinese assessed the situation. From the point of view of the Georgians, the Hualing Chinese behaved like "friends." Due to this behaviour and because of the Chinese's adaption to and involvement in local rituals and/or ritualized social practice, my local interviewees assumed that Chinese and Georgians also share similar codes of honour and a similar understanding of sociability.

I cannot say whether the Chinese or Uyghurs in particular share the same ideas and values. Looking at ethnography concerned with China, one can find descriptions of rituals, practices and

⁹ I was never able to confirm this story.

social relationships which resemble Georgian equivalents. The Chinese concept of “guanxi” (Brandtstädter 2009, Yang 1994, Yan 1996), for example, which is a widespread and contested form of reciprocal and hierarchal relationship includes many practices, obligations and codes of conduct that are comparable to those related to Georgian concepts of friendship, brotherhood and business-partnership, but also to practices associated with Soviet times, such as “blat” (a so-called economy of favours) (Ledeneva 1998) and other informal practices. Furthermore, in the context of *guanxi*, as well as in the broader context of China and the regional context of Uyghur culture, banquets have a long tradition (Yang 1994). Han Chinese, but especially Uyghurs, as other Central Asian people, share similar rites of hospitality with Caucasians, which might be rooted in common Turkish traditions. The above-described ritual of giving money at burials, again, is a practice that must be familiar to Uyghurs and Han Chinese alike. There is the Chinese tradition of giving monetary gifts (*lijin*), and keeping gift lists, so-called “*lidan*” (Yan 1996: 49-50). Actually, this and comparable practices at burials and weddings are widely established in the whole of Asia and the Caucasus (see, e.g., Brumann 1998, Yalçın-Heckmann 2001, Yan, 1996).

The question whether these practices and rituals have the same meaning and background also touches on the role of religious and cultural differences in interethnic/international exchange. Questions of cultural and religious identity are difficult to separate as they are blended with ethnic and national identities and ascriptions. Thus, it is, in my opinion, also hard to distinguish secular and religious rituals. The *supra*, for example, can be interpreted as a secular ritual. However, the ritual toasts may have religious content and address the Orthodox Church and the patriarch. Thus, there is some kind of link. A similar link may exist between religion and social constellations. Trading networks of Muslim communities, for example, are used for secular market exchange, but are usually described as based on mutual

respect among believers, who share the same values, which, again, are related to the Quran and the life of Mohammad.¹⁰ For this reason, the Muslim African traders working in Guangzhou described by Mathews (2015), and the Kyrgyz traders described by Schröder (2020), try to rely on Muslim networks when organizing their business in China. They prefer to work with people they can trust. This, as far as I understand, is also true for Uyghur trading networks in Central Asia and Hui networks in the Arab world.

Georgian traders or employees and Hualing Group’s Chinese business partners and employers do *not* share the same religious background. As I was told by Mariam, ethnic or religious identity was never discussed at her workplace. Only in the beginning, when she was hired by the Hualing Group to work at the Plaza, she was told that the heads of the company were Muslim and that for this reason “they don’t have or eat pork”. Questions and comments of that nature were never brought up again.

I think that different things are important for shaping relationships here. The business interests of all parties are obviously an important driving factor for establishing good contacts. Without trust, economic exchange is simply not possible. Referring to Dasgupta (1988) Humphrey argues that in the context of the economy “trust rests on the existence of a background agency, usually the state, that reliably enforces contracts and provides credible and impartial punishment for errant behaviour” (Humphrey 2018). But if the state fails to create trust, it must be replaced, as we learn from studies on informality, by other,

¹⁰ The identification of such links fits into the definition of the role of religion by Woodhead. As summarized by Burchardt and Becci (2013: 11): “According to her (Woodhead), religion has been theorized either as a system within culture (with a focus on beliefs meaning, values, discourses or memory and tradition), or as identity, belonging and boundaries. Moreover, religion is also conceptualized as a social relationship, as network connecting people”. Within Muslim networks, accordingly, trust (keeping one’s word) is perceived as part of a code of honour, which is linked to Islam and which has to be followed in the interaction with other Muslims or Muslim traders.

usually personalized agreements. Such personal arrangements cover a wide spectrum of relationships that are sometimes associated with illegal practices, but most of the time are based on reciprocal exchange. In Georgia, although trust, on the official level, is guaranteed by formal contracts and governmental backup institutions, economic success, as described above, depends on good personal relationships to elites, officials, fellow-businesspeople and clients.

Still, behaviour that establishes trust, I believe, cannot be explained by mere rational factors; that is, it cannot be understood with by pragmatism alone. Clearly, the Hualing Chinese/Uyghurs effectively adapt to the local environment and manage to participate in local practice. But I argue along with Sahlin's that people "act in a world in terms of the social beings they are" (Sahlin's 1999: 412). I suggest that Chinese and Georgian entrepreneurs, traders, employers and employees refer to their local concepts each, when establishing relationships with each other. At the same time, one can observe tolerance and acceptance toward strangers. In the Caucasus such forms of acceptance are quite common¹¹. For centuries, despite conflicts, ethnic groups have established ways to communicate and have even developed ritual bonds with each other.

Rituals and practices are linked to (religious) identity, beliefs and values. But, as I deduce from my interlocutor's accounts, it is the practice and not the spiritual content, theology or ideology that are emphasized. This corresponds with the stressing of orthopraxis over orthodoxy, that has been described as a feature of Chinese ritual practice (Brandtstädter 2009, Watson 1992), as well as with the idea that "the Chinese propensity to establish networks of personal connections" are the basis "for a more flexible, more success-

ful, 'Confucian capitalism'" (Brandtstädter 2009: 436). One can find many reasons for stressing orthopraxy. Gurchiani (2017) argues that Georgian Orthodoxy leaves space for negotiation and interpretation, especially when it comes to the interpretation and performance of so-called "domestic rituals," which are performed by lay people. The Soviet past of Georgia and the PRC's policies in China are certainly responsible for the secularization and domestication of many rituals. But even in the anthropology of Islam dealing with local contexts that have no communist background, there is a debate about whether *practice* should be at the centre of study. El-Zein (1977), for example, argues that Islam can take many shapes, which then are manifested in practice. Similarly, Schielke (2010) criticises that there is too much Islam in the Anthropology of Islam and advises to focus on practice and behaviour. Given the fact that religion is never made a topic in the context of Georgian-Chinese encounters, this advice seems even more appropriate in this context.

To conclude, I would like to make some suggestions how to read the encounters between Georgians and the Chinese and the positive feelings these evoked in my Georgian interlocutors:

1. It seems that local and Uyghur or/and the Chinese understandings of sociability are compatible. (As I do not know how Hualing members understand their identity, I can't differentiate between Uyghur and Chinese characteristics and deduce this conclusion from the answers of my Georgian interlocutors).
2. Chinese behaviour suggests familiarity with ritual feasting and similar life cycle rituals as performed in Georgia.
3. Given the very different cultural and religious backgrounds of the Georgians and the Chinese/Uyghurs, I suspect that the perceived compatibility of social and cultural values grounds on a mutual misunderstanding and misinterpretation of seemingly similar habits, practices and performances.
4. But this does not matter, because common practice, coming together for feasting and

¹¹ The capital Tbilisi is shaped by religious pluralism. Although most Georgians are born as Orthodox Christians and the Georgian Orthodox Church is central for national identity, one can find representatives of many other confessions. Neither the Soviet past nor globalization have led to a secularization of urban life (Burchardt & Becci 2013). On the opposite, in recent years, one could observe a religious revival.

mourning, and establishing good relationships is most important.

Whether these suggestions can serve as an explanation or not has to be clarified in future research that must include a Chinese perspective.

Conclusion

In this article, I presented some insights regarding Georgian perceptions of Muslim Chinese within the Caucasian business- and market sphere. Unlike in other parts of the world, Chinese presence is a relatively new phenomenon in the Caucasus. Here, one observes that ethno-religious difference is neglected or downplayed in business interaction. Instead, common understandings concerning social practice and social obligations are being emphasized and expressed in rituals of commensality, in gift giving and in other gestures of respect. These take place at the margins of the city and local society. However, these interactions become part of Tbilisi, its ethno-religious, political and economic composition. Much more research should be conducted on this topic. A promising approach would explore the question of interethnic and inter-religious cooperation from a "histoire croisée" (Freitag and van Oppen 2010) perspective, which would allow one to look at transnationalism and interethnic and interreligious encounters from different perspectives – the Georgian and the Chinese – on different levels of entanglement. This could also be a way to link the macro and micro-level, as well as individual actors and institutions and their socio-cultural backgrounds. By doing so, one would gain a better understanding of Chinese globalization, of international and intercultural encounters, and of (among other things) the role of religion in these processes.

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