

PROCESSIONS IN THE STREET: GEORGIAN ORTHODOX PRIVILEGE AND RELIGIOUS MINORITIES' RESPONSE TO INVISIBILITY

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Taking to the Streets

On Palm Sunday, 2007, in Tbilisi, Georgia, I walked to church in an annual procession sponsored by the Evangelical-Baptist Church of Georgia [EBC]. Around forty members took part in the morning trek through the city, including the EBC archbishop, the EBC president, the general secretary of the Association of American Baptist Churches in Georgia on a visit, Tbilisi-based Baptist pastors, lay leaders, as well as ministers from other regions. Also making the procession were a few children and teenagers, and a handful of long-term foreign visitors including my wife and me.

On a journey that would take us almost six miles, we walked on the outskirts of town in the district of Didi Dighomi at the church's main office and senior citizen care facility, Bethel Center (*beteli tsentri*). We left in the morning around 10:00, led not by church leaders but by a donkey and a specially commissioned icon of Christ's entry into Jerusalem. Many of the ministers were dressed in their usual clerical vestments, the archbishop most noticeably so in his purple robe, hat, cross necklace, and shepherd's crook. Many of us carried palm fronds.

The weather was clear and relatively warm which made for a good mood shared by all. The procession was far from austere, instead punctuated with our chatting and curious stares of frequent onlookers along sidewalks and from motor vehicles. We clogged the streets, often negotiating a place for ourselves among the passing traffic. While not deliberately disruptive, with a donkey and a gaggle of church folk, sidewalks could not always contain us, so we took our liberty in the street. We snaked our way through the bustling auto-bazaar, then across the river at the main *marshrutka* (minibus taxi) station into the Didube district. A while further we reached the main Baptist cathedral, renamed Peace Cathedral several months later, where the Palm Sunday icon was publicly blessed and the two-hour church service began in earnest with bell ringing, liturgical dancing, and the Eucharist. It was a procession without protests or emotional performances, yet neither was it terribly formal or solemn.

That same week, on April 6, "Red Friday" (the Orthodox equivalent of Catholic-Protestant Good Friday), the EBC organized, for the fifth consecutive year, another procession through the streets of Tbilisi. The Baptists invited representatives and parishioners of the other Christian communities to join them in a march commemorating Christ's crucifixion. Armenians, Roman-Catholics, and Lutherans all had a presence during the procession. The Georgian Orthodox Church had been invited as well, but evidently had declined to participate.

Although the distances of both processions and the number participating were about the same, this second journey felt much longer. This was explicitly an ecumenical procession. It began at the Armenian cathedral in Tbilisi's Old Town and proceeded across the downtown through the city center and eventually across the river, visiting Roman Catholic and Lutheran cathedrals, and finally reaching the Baptist Peace Cathedral. We entered each cathedral and read a small litany composed of a bible reading of one of the gospel accounts of the crucifixion, a homily prepared by a representative minister, and a collective recitation of the Lord's Prayer ("mamao chveno").

In the streets, the procession was lead by a six-foot wooden cross. After exiting each cathedral that church's leader would carry the cross with the Baptist archbishop as a sign of Christian unity. Much like the Palm Sunday procession, the event was friendly, non-confrontational, and not given to strong emotion even as we brought traffic to a standstill when we cut across busy intersections or blocked a lane. And like before, looks and stares followed us from place to place even as we walked and talked among ourselves. When we walked downtown, we bisected the famous Freedom Square (along with the automobiles circling the roundabout) and continued down Rustaveli Avenue, the main thoroughfare. At the Parliament building, without fanfare, we paused, huddled together and prayerfully recited the Lord's Prayer. Then we walked on. Although officially an ecumenical march, the majority of participants were Baptist. Other than the short

distances church leaders walked when they carried the cross, only a few from churches other than Baptist managed the entire trek. The Baptist archbishop said later that it was the most successful Red Friday march they had ever had.

This article highlights the Georgian Baptists' public struggle for equitable recognition. In particular I concentrate on the political ambiguity created by the current Georgian government that, when working in tandem with other factors, acts as a formidable obstacle to keep Baptists (as well as other non-Orthodox religious groups) out of "Georgian public space." But Baptists in both processions and together with other religious minorities in the second procession appear to challenge their marginalization through their own self-disclosure. Although for years non-Orthodox Christians have been disenfranchised through a lack of legal recourse and marginalization through intimidation and at times outright violence, Baptists along with other Christian minorities are now declaring their presence in the center of the city, their city. However, it is difficult to say who in power is listening.

In Georgia today, Georgian Orthodox Christianity enjoys a privileged position in the politics of national identity. It belongs to the dominant discourse of the nation-state linking authentic membership in the national community with allegiance to the Georgian Orthodox Church. Whereas the Georgian Orthodox Church has enjoyed a centuries-long presence in Georgian history, the past several decades of political foment in the country have transformed adherence to Georgian Orthodox Christianity into a litmus test for national devotion. In the later years of the Soviet Union, Georgian dissidents began to mobilize against the Soviet government, often using the Orthodox Church and its symbolic and historic resources to define ethnonational boundaries. They promoted the Georgian Orthodox Church as a symbol of the authentic Georgian community, marginalizing those outside of the Church's domain. Even today, we see the Georgian Orthodox Church receiving overwhelming support in the media and government even while ethnic minorities and native Georgians who participate in non-Orthodox religious traditions (including Muslims, Jews, Catholics, and Protestants) are swept under the carpet of public debate out of suspicion that they may be threats to the nation's well-being.

In this atmosphere of mistrust, over the past ten years, the Evangelical-Baptist Church of Georgia has initiated a series of internal reforms. Based on my ethnographic fieldwork among Georgian Baptists, including extensive interviews with the Baptist archbishop and the association president, these reforms were a conscious effort to root out the EBC's self-ascribed sectarian legacy and to bridge gaps between Georgian Baptists and the Orthodox majority by transforming the EBC into what they deem to be more "culturally relevant." These reforms aim to transform the church both in its relationship to itself and with society at large. The most provocative of these reforms has been the adaptation of Orthodox symbols and traditions for ordinary Baptist worship. In the processions, we see these visible changes, now standard issue, in the use of icons and the Orthodox-like clerical appearances of the Baptist archbishop and his retinue. These processions, however, offer an important glimpse into the public face of EBC reforms and their contestation of Orthodox power in Georgian society. The motivations for these processions stem from broader, "outwardly facing" reform goals that include giving attention to issues of social justice, building citywide ecumenical dialogue, and exercising a "prophetic role" of speaking truth to state power.

Ambiguity and Invisibility

These processions are part of Georgian Baptists' efforts (and in the Red Friday procession a collective effort of many religious minorities) to address their own "invisibility" in public discourse. I use the analogy of invisibility to convey the kind of marginality that Baptists and their peers have experienced in recent years, stemming from the ambiguity of politicians' endeavors to reorganize the government according to Western neoliberal norms. My study joins other anthropology investigating these public instances of ambiguity, which Paul Manning identifies as the result of a major thrust since the 2003 Rose Revolution "to create a new cosmology, a self-conscious 'new reality'" (Manning 2007: 173).

Turning his attention to the original, stage-setting student protests of 2001, their effect on the Rose Revolution, and the incorporation of their reformist values into post-Rose Revolution government policy, Manning identifies highly effective rhetorical strategies that managed to assuage widespread popular mistrust in

government. A key objective of these strategies was to distance the protests from the discredited post-Soviet governments of Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Eduard Shevardnadze (the 2001 protests took place during the nadir of Shevardnadze's rule). Among other things, organizers reframed the protests as "a colorful mélange of political images and references from frankly contradictory political programs" (Manning 2007: 179). Manning highlights the juxtaposition of secular and sacred images at one point in these protests when popular television cartoon caricatures lampooning the discredited government were displayed side by side with icons of the Virgin Mary (the *Theotokos*) and St. George (both patron saints of the nation-state). These images along with the speeches that accompanied them helped to distance the reformers from the dysfunctional and democratically incapable regime while embracing the "surety" of Georgia's sacralized nationhood. Moreover, this re-emergence of national forms to promote state success legitimized Saakashvili's meteoric rise to power, even though such national gestures have acted merely "as a local veneer for a political product that is effectively neoliberal" (Manning 2007: 176). Coincidentally, despite international attention and investment, self-congratulatory fanfare, and pomp, very little has changed (Manning 2007: 202, Dunn 2008: 254).

This political ambiguity can be found in other public sectors. Elizabeth Dunn points out the uneven nature of Georgian neoliberal governance by focusing on the astounding rate of cases of botulism in Georgia, the world's highest. She explains that unlike the vogue sectors of prisoner health, education or law enforcement which have received the most international attention, the agricultural sector is a "nonstate space" that is "free from regulation or standardization" and "a zone uncontrolled by the state" (Dunn 2008: 255). These nonstate spaces represent the failure of the reform-minded state to consolidate governmental power through policy and oversight. If agriculture is one blind spot in local governance because it exists outside the immediate concern of lawmakers, the religious sector represents not a nonstate space, but rather a "non-nonstate space"—where state power has adopted a clear protocol for securing the interests of one religious institution, the Georgian Orthodox Church, but not others. Religious minorities are left unrepresented, uninsured, and invisible as religious institutions, so that the religious sector is legislated and not legislated at the same time. This state-sponsored

ambiguity of religious freedom results in the prevailing discursive "visibility" of the Georgian Orthodox Church and the consequent invisibility of non-Orthodox.

The government's uneven application of reforms points to its inability or unwillingness to create a truly innovative political cosmology. In terms of religion, the state's failure to successfully governmentalize the expectations of non-Orthodox citizens highlights a persistent national discourse in Georgian affairs that refuses to link state success outside a narrowly defined ethno-religious membership. This kind of ambiguity underlies the public spaces of the city that religious minorities are negotiating in these religious processions.

I approach the idea of the "city" as urban space embedded in and emerging from relations of (often hegemonic) power that, following Zukin (1995), "shap[e] public space for social interaction and [construct] a visual representation of the city" (24). In this view, the city is more often a stage or a framing device for ostensibly more important matters and relations. Yet the very fact that a city can stage or frame suggests that its unquestioned and unnoticed presence does indeed play a part in the discursive formations underlying the politics of the everyday. This is not to assign undue agency to the city, but rather to infer how urban areas contribute to the naturalness of hegemony in everyday life.

While I am not trying to overdetermine the power of the Orthodox Church in the everyday lives of people living in Georgia, I do contend that the advantages enjoyed by the Georgian Orthodox Church in the politics of the Georgian nation-state has real consequences, whether in government or in a public venue, say, simply walking down the street. One of these consequences is an Orthodox monopoly of urban areas, analogous to what Page and Thomas (1994) have called "white public space" in the United States. They define white public space as any area that "may entail particular or generalized locations, sites, patterns, configurations, tactics, or devices that routinely, discursively, and sometimes coercively privilege Euro-Americans over nonwhites" (Page and Thomas 1994: 111). Appropriating public space becomes a tactic of those in power to endorse that power in areas where all members of society frequently come together (Page and Thomas 1994: 113). In Georgia, what emerges at the intersection of physical structures, legal

discourse, and national ideology is what we could call “Georgian public space,” keeping in mind that the word Georgian denotes the ideological limits of ethnicity, which includes affiliation with the Georgian Orthodox Church. Public areas of the city, in this sense, are not just Georgian public space, but “Orthodox Georgian public space.” In the dominant national discourse, there is no admission of any other kind of Georgian space.

Bradford Martin (2004) found in his own study of public performance in the United States in the 1960s that artists of the counterculture attempted to bridge a gap between culture and politics, meshing their activism in the unexpected spaces of the everyday. By removing their contestation outside the museum, the hall, and the auditorium, activists sought to transform mundane spaces into impromptu stages with their various performances. “The street,” as it were, was transformed into a public site for contesting the status quo. Of course, the street had always been public, but addressing the institutional chasm between the Arts and the world outside politicized Art and charged the ordinary with unprecedented import by incorporating ordinary public venues and unsuspecting onlookers into the artistic production. Martin argues that this impact on the boundaries separating the public from the political [sic] stemmed from a desire to “‘re-enchant’ and re-animate politics” by “democratize[in] culture by trying to communicate with broader audiences where the performer-activists encountered them, most often, in the streets” (Martin 2004: 14, 10).

It is Martin’s notion of public performance for the purposes of re-enchanting and re-animating politics that concerns me here in making sense of Georgian-Baptists’ processions in the streets of Tbilisi. The processions shake up the hegemony of public spaces because the participants defy their own discursive invisibility. In a sense, religious minorities stage themselves. They do this precisely by putting themselves literally in the center of things, showing themselves as religious persons in the public space of the street in full view of, well, anyone who happens to be there. The “out-of-sight, out-of-mind” blinders that discourse can cloak over social complexity fail as religious minorities reveal themselves irrefutably as being there.

In what follows, I want to draw attention to three modes of interrelated political

behavior that work to incorporate Georgia’s public areas into the dominant discursive imaginary that I call Georgian public space. Taking as axiomatic Michel de Certeau’s notion that space emerges out of the practice of place (1985: 101), these political behaviors work together to constitute “the street” as de facto Orthodox Georgian space and perpetuate the kind of ideological dominance that marginalizes religious minorities. These include legal discourse, the spatialization of Orthodox cathedrals, and the public rituals that Orthodox believers frequently perform. The Palm Sunday and Red Friday processions, in response, represent a refutation of the ideological claims of the dominant discourse—that legitimate national belonging rests only on a confession of Orthodox faith. The processions attempt to contradict the discursive meanings assigned to public space by attempting to carve out new spaces of public recognition through their public spectacle.

In the Eyes of Government

The political ambiguity promulgated by the Georgian government is found in other post-socialist countries. A significant obstacle to making equitable laws is the longevity of Soviet frameworks that institutionalized identification with a particular ethnonational community as the determining factor in state membership. As Katherine Verdery has said, “ethnonational identities were perhaps the principal form of ‘collective consciousness’ that socialism produced” (Verdery 1998: 293). Jiri Priban argues that mutually exclusive political strategies appealing to the universal rights of individuals and to rights bestowed on ethnonational communities were equally reasonable solutions in forming new state ideologies, because they were not perceived as contradictory formations. Ideas like civil society and civic membership had to be introduced to post-socialist societies as *one of many* viable traditions on which the government could base itself: “Rebuilding *national* identity, in the sense of ethnic and cultural identity, was an important part of rebuilding *political* identity” (Priban 2004: 416, emphasis in original).

Political actors could not afford to distance themselves or their agendas from the ethnonational interests of state constituents. National identity expressed in popular symbols, rhetoric, and legislation, was a powerful currency in winning popular support, so that “nationalism in the region’s politics became a

matter of degree rather than a distinct political option" (Verdery 1998: 294). Thus, the emerging "democracies" of the 1990s in post-Soviet countries bore a decidedly ethnonational thumb print. In what Robert Hayden famously called "constitutional nationalism" (Hayden 1992: 655), self-proclaimed democratic states wrote their constitutions guaranteeing full rights and freedoms for members of the ethnic majority while disenfranchising members of other ethnic communities, even those individuals who had lived in those countries all their lives (see also Verdery 1998: 294-295).

In Georgia, the scant legislation on religion illustrates this kind of two-headed constitutional strategy, which grants token assurances of freedom for all while at the same time sanctioning the interests of the ethnonational majority. To date there are three items of legislation on religion: Article 9 of the Constitution, the 2002 constitutional Concordat between the state and the Georgian Orthodox Church, and an amendment on registration of non-Orthodox religious groups passed in April 2005. The first of these, Article 9 of the Georgian constitution, simply states:

The state recognizes the special importance of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Georgian history but simultaneously declares complete freedom of religious belief and confessions, as well as independence of the church from the state.

While the article does make explicit the official recognition of the Orthodox Church, it does not declare it the "state church." In fact it declares the separation of church and state along with the right to religious freedom for all.

On October 14, 2002, the tables turned dramatically when then-President Shevardnadze and Patriarch Ilia II signed the controversial church-state Concordat. Like Article 9, it does not recognize the Georgian Orthodox Church as the state church, but it does legally cede some authority of the religious sphere to the Georgian Patriarchate. Among other things, the Concordat awards the Patriarchate full ownership of all its church buildings, monasteries, and the land they are built on, as well as church treasures permanently held in museums. The agreement also gives the Orthodox Church the final word on which religious groups can legally call themselves churches, what items may be used in services, and what religious literature may be published. Finally, it stipulates that the Georgian

Orthodox Church may veto construction or planned construction of new buildings for any religious group (Rayeva 2002). Whereas the Concordat inscribes these privileges into law, the Patriarchate had been exercising this kind of authority since *at least* a year before the agreement was adopted (Keston News Service 2001).

On April 6, 2005, President Saakashvili signed an amendment allowing non-Orthodox religious groups to register as *non-commercial* entities. This means that religious groups are unable to own property as religious organizations. They can neither be represented in court as a viable community, nor open bank accounts in the religious organization's name (*Forum 18* 2005). The only church that has legal status as a religious organization is the Georgian Orthodox Church, which *officially* secured this status in the Concordat. Non-Orthodox religious groups have no legal presence.

Perhaps the lack of real political will to protect the rights of all religions can be understood by Elizabeth Dunn's prescient observation that "spaces and populations ... are seen as not interesting enough, or not useful enough, to merit governance" (Dunn 2008:255). Dunn was linking failures in agriculture with the state's uneven realization of neoliberal governance, but the observation could easily apply to religious legislation. The Georgian government has sought to reform only those sectors that are most often used to measure international success (and thus to receive further international attention, aid, and investments). The religious legislation of the Saakashvili administration underscores this position. The present administration has relegated religious minorities into non-nonstate spaces. While the Georgian Orthodox Church is free to exercise its authority *carte blanche*, non-Orthodox groups must claim to be something entirely un-religious in order to be "seen" in the eyes of the state at all.

Sacred Space and the Material World

Certainly, Georgian Orthodox cathedrals are not the only buildings crowding the Tbilisi skyline. A glut of international hotels, Western food shops, over-priced luxury European clothing stores, and Japanese electronics retailers compete for space and the attention of potential customers. But as the legal "landscape" described above indicates, the Georgian Orthodox Church enjoys guarantees for

maintaining a symbolic and material monopoly of Georgian public space. Orthodox churches exist in far greater numbers than other non-Orthodox religious buildings. This abundance relates to three things: the legislation highlighted above, the theological motivations of Orthodox Christianity, and the theological and social outlooks traditionally held in Protestant Christianity.

The Georgian Orthodox Church's theological motivation to fill terrestrial space with manifestations of heavenly glory easily reinforces the Church's ideological position as an ethnonational institution and its spatial monopoly. As Glenn Bowman (1991) explains, Orthodox cosmology dictates a clear separation between the world of God and the world of humanity, with the sacred forms and practices of the (Orthodox) Church acting as conduits of God's redemptive presence to the fallen world. The Church's traditional sacramental objects – sacraments, prayers, icons, holy persons, liturgies, even church buildings – sit in both worlds. To contemplate them is to enter into the real presence of God. These are not merely pedagogical tools. They are stages for cosmological encounters, bearing witness to God's redemption and ushering of grace into the material world. By encountering these sacramental things, believers encounter the revelation of heaven amid the corrupted world: "Within Orthodoxy the divine liturgy as well as other vehicles of the sacred like icons or holy relics serve as means for allowing people to 'step out' of illusion and to see creation, as a whole, in relation to its creator.... [Orthodox believers'] entry into holy space presages their entry, at death, into eternity" (Bowman 1991: 104).

Whereas the Christian traditions of the West found it necessary to rationalize such encounters with the sacred, which in Protestant traditions has been especially true given the penchant for convincing the unconverted of their need for salvation based on logical arguments, Orthodox Christianity traditionally has relatively few stated doctrinal absolutes, preferring that the "logic" of faith show itself in the regular practices, postures, and prayers of worship. In this sense, religious practice conflates ritual and theology. It seems to insist that worship "speaks for itself," or as Timothy Ware states, "Lex orandi lex credendi: our faith is expressed in our prayer" (Ware 1993: 205).

Orthodox Christianity and Western rites differ in their value of materiality. Orthodox

Christianity requires material certainty, so that church buildings *should* stand out from their surroundings precisely because the sacred is separate from the mundane world. The typical Protestant imperative, however, has been to liberate individuals from traditions and institutions that prohibit living freely and frankly before God, or in Webb Keane's formulation, "to abstract the self from material and social entanglements" (Keane 2007: 201). Material objects - words as well as things - acquired new meanings and became potentially hazardous to faith because words and things might interfere with or replace sincere relationship with God with a befuddling opacity. The guarantee of God's grace was not contingent on sacramental encounters in the world but rather on the inner condition of the individual believer.

These theological presumptions together with current circumstances of public animosity serve to make the presence of Baptists (and similar religious traditions) less visible. Baptists in Georgia traditionally have preferred functional minimalism to any (to their minds) distracting pomp or pretense. The exteriors of buildings, for example, often look no different from buildings next door. They were (and often still are) converted houses with no steeples, no crosses, and no ornamentation of any kind to distinguish them. The clergy, too, have traditionally worn shirts and ties so that they looked no different from other parishioners. Perhaps such plain arrangements worked to camouflage or insulate Baptist congregations from an oppressive government and the public suspicion they incurred in the Soviet Union (not to mention the fear of violence in the post-Soviet era).

The severity of this "separation from the world" can be measured by the extent of current efforts in the Baptist Church to encourage parishioners to engage collectively with social and civic issues. In my interviews with Baptist Archbishop Songhulashvili, he explained¹: "I think the main thing that the reforms brought us was taking us from the ghetto and placing us in the market place.... We had been used to the idea for almost one hundred or more years, that we are...closed, that we should be confined with[in] these walls, [that] the space beyond these walls does not belong to us.... It belonged to the Orthodox world." The reform-inspired processions described above attempt to integrate the activities of the church with Georgian society as a means of liberating the

Baptist Church from its sectarian legacy: "This is about affirming what we believe in. We believe in being fully involved in the life of the community. Not being separated by the walls of the ghetto, but being a part with, being in the midst of the things that are happening everywhere where people are and working for transformation." These words are not in response to discrimination, but rather to Baptists' previously self-imposed isolation. That is to say, previously Baptists played a major role in cordoning themselves off from the rest of society by removing themselves literally from view.

Performing Georgian Orthodox Space

Georgian public space, as I use the term, is not simply the result of legislation ceding the administrative authority of religious matters into the lap of the Georgian Patriarchate. It is also not merely the ubiquity of Georgian Orthodox cathedrals punctuating the skyline and the absence of religious minorities from public view. Where it includes the law and the physical presence of Orthodox buildings, it also includes individuals' symbolic action that manifests public connections with Orthodox faith.

"Georgian" space is not filled so much as it is practiced. Speech and behavior activate that space and perpetuate it in time and place. Take for instance probably the most common ritual among Orthodox Christians: making the sign of the cross on the chest with thumb and fingers. While making the sign of the cross occurs inside church buildings, for example during the liturgy or while venerating icons, it is also customary for believers to cross themselves while passing by church buildings. Derived from an acknowledgment of sacred space, this type of genuflection is remarkably unremarkable for happening so frequently, whether on the street, in a taxi, or on public transit. For example, the largest Georgian cathedral, Sameba, itself a dominant religious symbol on Tbilisi's skyline, can be seen from Freedom Square, despite being located almost a mile away across the river and almost blocked by rooftops. It is not uncommon to see passers-by face Sameba's shimmering dome and cross themselves (although I will admit that it is difficult at times to determine if they are facing Sameba or instead the over-sized, gilded statue of St. George that towers over Freedom Square).

While even many Georgian Baptists have no problem identifying with many of these rituals (incidentally I have observed a few

Baptists crossing themselves during their own worship services), these ritual meanings share in multiple discourses that implicate the larger frameworks of national ideology and nation-state building. Implicated in de Certeau's argument that social spaces emerge from the practice of place (de Certeau 1985: 101), public performances help incorporate ordinary geographic places into discursive paradigms, so that performing even what appears the most forgettable ritual infuses particular place (even the street outside) with specific ideological meanings.

A case in point is Pelkmans's (2006) investigation into the recent spread of (Georgian Orthodox) Christianity into the predominantly Muslim area of Achara at the Turkish-Georgian border. In this borderland area the tension between religious affiliation and authentic national belonging has been similar. However, it is more acute than in Tbilisi and has resulted in the increased, albeit uneven, construction of churches and mosques and other public symbols among both Muslim and Christian camps. Pelkmans explains, "The Christian clergy drew on financial as well as political resources generated through state structures. The activities of Muslim leaders, on the other hand, were denied recognition by the media, were frowned upon by nationalist-oriented elite groups, and were subjected to state interventions" (Pelkmans 2006: 120). He prefaces that section of his ethnography with an anecdote about an Orthodox Christian pilgrimage conducted in 2000, complete with bishop, priests, pro-Orthodox intellectuals, and a special icon, snaking its way through a Muslim village to commemorate the coming of the gospel message to the area almost two thousand years earlier. In an effort to celebrate the good news, pilgrims were also "reminding" onlookers of their Georgian-Christian origins with the hope that "local inhabitants would return to their original, native religion" (Pelkmans 2006: 93).

Another example can be found in the event held in 2004 at the graveside of Georgia's most famous king, St. David "the Builder." Here Mikhiel Saakashvili, then president-elect, swore a pre-inaugural oath in honor of the legendary king, siding with the king's reputation as Orthodox Christian state builder and promising the soul of the departed king that he (Saakashvili) would lead the country out of squalor and ineffective government into a new age. The oath-taking ceremony was

unprecedented. Not only did Georgian Patriarch-Catholicos Ilia II preside over the ceremony, but also the monastery where the ceremony took place was packed and covered by the major television stations and newspapers. Whatever Saakashvili's personal motivations, his performance was saturated with Georgian Orthodox sensibilities and broadcast a statist agenda marked with Orthodoxy's stamp of approval.

A Response to Invisibility

Tbilisi's thoroughfares may be ordinary streets but they are not neutral sites. They are constant reminders of the authority of Georgian Orthodoxy. Legal privileges, the physical and visual presence of Orthodox places of worship, and the ritual performances of Orthodox believers in public places contribute to a ubiquitous Orthodox materiality in Georgian society. The Georgian street, in this light, mirrors the dominant national ideology linking specific ethnonational interests with state success. The Palm Sunday and Red Friday processions traverse through the politically charged public streets of Tbilisi, illustrating that to engage public space in Georgia is to engage space dominated by Orthodox privilege.

I mentioned that these events bear a similarity with what Bradford Martin described of counter-culture movements in the United States of the 1960s. Counterculture groups went about "combining street-level politics and dramatic spectacle" (Martin 2004: 164) in an effort to draw attention to the deficiencies of power and the status quo. By relocating their protest to public venues, artist-activists communicated "symbolic messages about social and political issues to audiences who might not have encountered them in more traditional venues" (Martin: 4).

As in the experience of the United States, which obviously continues to have its own kinds of "invisible" citizens, Georgia's religious minorities have sought to address their political invisibility with, if you will, the discourse of feet on pavement. They peacefully challenge the politically ambiguous status quo of their own religious identity-cum-state belonging by presenting themselves as non-Orthodox religious persons in Orthodox space, "join[ing] performers and audience on an immediate level, with minimal governmental, corporate, and electronic filtering, offering communion and

transformation as tangible possibilities" (Martin: 164-165).

Unlike in the cases described by Martin, these processions are not artistic expressions. Yet they embody an alternative possibility about public space by creating new spaces out of familiar places. The streets of the Georgian capital become a template for a new politics that re-associates public life with religious diversity. Processions signal a claim by religious minorities to equitable belonging despite differences, asserting that Georgian public space is "multi-faith" space. The archbishop explained it to me as follows:

It is very important that religious people...live harmoniously, without compromising anything, without compromising any religious principles. We are saying that we are under heaven as it were. We have our churches, our strategies, our missions, but it is still possible to cooperate....We do not agree with [other religious groups] in everything, but they are friends. It is up to the "boss" [i.e. God] how to handle them. But it is our call to serve anybody in the name of Christ, to promote peace and reconciliation in the name of the faith, and be...friends with those who do not agree with us and whom we do not agree with their theology [*sic*] or in their understanding of God.

I began this article by situating the Holy Week processions in the Georgian government's failures to consolidate a successful democratic regime. Equivocal policies and rhetoric have created political ambiguity favoring the interests of the Georgian Orthodox Church and at the same time ignoring non-Orthodox religious groups. The root of this failure lies in what now must be the familiar shortcomings of Soviet-bred nationalism to account for state loyalties that exist outside the ideology that links an objectified culture with self-determination. This situation is not only an obstacle to religious minorities. Rather than securing its own independence, the Georgian Orthodox Church has inextricably linked itself to the politics of nation-building. Its otherworldly symbology, its discourse, its gatekeeper-status into Heaven's court, and indeed its ubiquitous presence street after street paradoxically justify state claims to a terrestrial dominion. While the marches are themselves commemorations of some of the

most important holidays on the Christian calendar they also negotiate Orthodox power. Because religion is not divorced from the politics of the state, these processions actively engage, construct, and transform relations and the possibilities of new kinds of relations in public spaces. In this sense, I suggest that Georgian Baptists are not simply changing their place in the city. They are changing the discursive space of the city, as they have known it.

Endnotes

¹ My interviews with the archbishop were conducted in English. The archbishop's quoted speech in this article is not a translation from Georgian, but is in English as it was originally recorded.

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