



University
of Glasgow



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School of Arts and Science
Master of Caucasian Studies

The Church and the Virus: Frontiers of Secularization and Political Theology in Contemporary Georgian Orthodoxy

CEERES Master Thesis – *by* Rose Isabella Hinman

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August, 2021

Tbilisi, Georgia

The Church and the Virus: Frontiers of Secularization and Political Theology in Contemporary Georgian Orthodoxy

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degrees of
University of Tartu / Faculty of Social Sciences, Johan Skytte Institute
of Political Studies / *Master of Arts (MA) in Central, Eastern European,
Russian & Eurasian Studies*

University of Glasgow / School of Social and Political Sciences /
*International Master (IntM) in Central, Eastern European, Russian & Eurasian
Studies*

Ilia State University / School of Arts and Sciences / *Master of Caucasian
Studies*

Supervised by Dr. Ghia Nodia and Dr. Federica Prina

Word Count: 24,352 (including all footnotes and tables in the text,
excluding abstract, acknowledgments, table of contents, appendices and
bibliography)

2021, Tartu/Glasgow/Tbilisi



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Abbreviations

Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia (“Georgian Orthodox Church”) – GOC

Russian Orthodox Church – ROC

Georgian Dream – GD

United National Movement – UNM

European Union – EU

North Atlantic Treaty Organization – NATO

International Organization – IO

Social Justice Center (formerly known as Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center) –

SJC (formerly known as EMC)

Caucasus Research Resource Centers – CRRC

National Democratic Institute – NDI

Prime Minister – PM

Note on Translations, Transliterations, and Proper Names

This dissertation was written in Standard American English. Unless otherwise noted, all translations used in this thesis are my own.

When transliterating from Georgian or Russian, I have used the Library of Congress system, but have avoided diacritics, which typically mark aspiration (*Paata* instead of *P'aata*).

Toponyms have been rendered in their most common form. Proper names of individuals have been transliterated from Georgian rather than translated (writing *Davit* and *Ilia*, as the names would be pronounced in Georgian, rather than anglicizing them as *David* and *Elijah*).

When using the names of clergy members, I have deferred to the system is most widely used in both Georgian and Russian press to distinguish between individuals. First, I list their rank in the hierarchy, followed by their Christian name (that which they take upon joining the priesthood), and, finally, their last name.

Acknowledgements

My path to this dissertation has been circuitous, and I would be remiss if I did not express my sincere appreciation to everyone who helped me get to this point.

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my advisors, Dr. Ghia Nodia and Dr. Federica Prina. When I first proposed this topic in April 2020, after my previous dissertation plan was rendered impossible by the pandemic, they were incredibly supportive, working with me to narrow the project's focus over the ensuing months. Their guidance, feedback, kindness, and patience throughout this entire process have been invaluable.

I would also like to thank all of the interviewees who participated. I was new to the study of Orthodoxy, and their generosity with their time and knowledge has helped me wade into the deep waters of this remarkable religious tradition with a little more confidence.

დდი მადლობა to Natia Putkaradze for her kind assistance with the translation of documents. She and the rest of my instructors at the ALC in Tbilisi made studying Georgian a true delight. Thank you to all of my professors in Estonia, Scotland, and Georgia, who broadened my knowledge and challenged me academically. I also send my appreciation to the coordinators and the administrative staff of the IMCEERES program. This degree has been an extraordinary opportunity for personal and professional growth, and none of it would have been possible without your tireless efforts.

Finally, thank you to the people who have surrounded me over the past year. To my classmates, who made grieving the loss of our friend and colleague Juho Nikko to COVID less isolating this Spring. To my friends, who provided brainstorming sessions, moral support, and levity. To Rustam, for enduring my histrionics (and, miraculously, making me laugh through them), isolating with me, and loving me. And, finally, to my family and, in particular, my parents. I would never be at this stage if it weren't for you. I promise to stop forcing you all into long conversations about Orthodoxy for at least a few months.

Abstract

This dissertation focuses on how internal ideological dynamics and political theologies of religious institutions shape their articulations of political claims. It explores how the “success” of traditionalist claims can drive formal desecularization at the expense of triggering a liberal backlash. These issues are explored through an in-depth case study of the conflict that emerged in Spring of 2020 between fundamentalists, traditionalists, and liberals in the Georgian Orthodox Church and Orthodox scholarly community over the Holy Synod’s decision not to modify religious services despite the novel coronavirus pandemic and nationwide state of emergency. It finds that the GOC can be characterized as a traditionalist institution due to its tendency to privilege Orthodoxy over other religions, challenge the validity of secular knowledge, and articulate the exercise of religion in terms of human rights. The reasons behind these stances have also been explored. This thesis posits that this episode was caused primarily by a permissive attitude towards ideological division in the Church and an agreement between the traditionalist Patriarchate and fundamentalist segment of the Synod. The liberal critique of the Church’s political claims, which represent a minority political claim, is also explored through the public criticisms of theologians.

Keywords: Orthodoxy, Traditionalism, Fundamentalism, Georgian Orthodox Church, Public Religion, Secularization, Desecularization, Novel Coronavirus

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Research Aims and Questions

In the Spring of 2020, the Georgian Orthodox Church¹ refused to close its doors despite the deadly coronavirus pandemic and the subsequent government declaration of a state of emergency. Before the virus had even started to spread domestically, Church officials stated in public that they would not modify the traditional communion ritual or consider closing churches. This put the government in the position of having to continually negotiate over several months with one of the country's most powerful and respected institutions in a moment of acute fear and crisis. Although the Church and State eventually brokered an agreement, the numerous pleas of public health officials, claims by the Prime Minister and Minister of Justice that the state of emergency should also apply to the Church, and several meetings with Church officials demonstrated that the Church-State agreement over Easter was not a true compromise, but rather a Government concession before an intransigent Church. This period was marked by an explosion of commentary and debate about the public messaging role of clergy in times of emergency, what constitutes "social responsibility" on the part of secular and religious leaders, arguments over the constitutionality of the State potentially limiting religious gatherings, and individual exploration of the morality of attending, or choosing not to attend, services under pandemic conditions.

This episode demonstrated the political power of the Church and its ability to *de facto* dictate outcomes in conflicts with a weak state. The Church, in most estimations, understood this event as an opening for an articulation of political goals. Therefore, the research questions that guided this project were:

1. To what extent was the conflict that emerged manufactured for political gain or genuinely rooted in theological challenges?
2. When a window of opportunity emerged, what political claims did the Church make?
3. What responses did this claim-making prompt from the public?

In this work, I focus primarily on the Church's articulation of political aims and the critical response that this triggered from within the Orthodox tradition. I endeavor to answer these questions by consulting media, analyzing the Church's public statements, and conducting expert

¹ In a brief terminological note, this dissertation will refer to the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia as the "Georgian Orthodox Church," "the Church," or the "GOC," as this term is used more widely in area studies literature. Some interviewees and sources refer to the same institution as the "Orthodox Church of Georgia."

interviews. In the conclusion, I briefly address the impacts of this agreement and conflict on the general public and Church-State relations.

1.2 Thesis Statements

This dissertation puts forward two interrelated arguments about the causes and effects of this event. Firstly, this conflict between the Church and the State is attributable in large part to the current institutional structure of the Church and the Patriarchate's permissive stance towards deep internal ideological divisions. This thesis argues that the three epistemic stances that typify traditionalist engagement – privileging Orthodoxy, challenging secular (in this case, scientific and medical) knowledge, and articulating the exercise of religion in terms of human rights – were all visible in the Patriarchate's challenge to the State catalyzed by the Coronavirus. These traditionalist positions formed a successful bid for further formal desecularization, as the government ceded that the state of emergency could not constitutionally be applied to limit religious freedom and accommodated all of the demands of the Church. Secondly, the Church's political statements and rhetorical methods of engagement contributed to the emergence of the Easter agreement as a site of post-secular conflict in Georgian society, prompting a liberal backlash. I focus on the critical responses to the State's position and the Church's claims, specifically from the community of independent theologians, who argue from within the Orthodox interpretive tradition for the GOC to engage differently with the State.

Chapter 2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This dissertation will use three main conceptual frameworks to approach these issues: the literatures on secularization and desecularization, Church-State relations in Orthodoxy, and the state of emergency.

2.1 Public Religions and Religious Groups as Political Actors

In the 1960s and 70s, scholars of religion and sociologists developed a set of ideas that would later be called “secularization theory.” The fundamental premise of the theory was that, in industrialized democracies, religion would become increasingly differentiated from areas of life now defined by secular norms (the State, science, and the economy, to name a few domains), would have to settle into its own privatized realm, and would, eventually, lose its vitality. Jose Casanova offered a refinement of the theory, arguing that secularization was composed of three unintegrated processes: the differentiation of spheres, the decline of religious beliefs, and the privatization of religion. He came to this conclusion through a series of case studies demonstrating that, even when the differentiation phase of secularization *does* occur, religion does not necessarily cease to play a public role (Casanova 1994). Vyacheslav Karpov, observing the resurgence of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) in Russian society in the 90s and 2000s, provided a further refinement through his articulation of desecularization. Following Casanova’s framework, Karpov conceptualizes desecularization as the rapprochement between formerly secularized institutions and religious norms, the resurgence of religious beliefs and practices, and the return of religion to the public sphere (Karpov 2010). This was particularly appropriate for the post-Soviet context, which had been secularized by force and had to, through policy, consciously choose to reinsert religion into public life. It is now more common to think of secularization and desecularization as a dynamic, dialogic, and reversible process rather than the original teleological bent of secularization theory.

How religions engage a pluralistic public has, therefore, become the subject of many studies. In 2006, philosopher Jurgen Habermas argued that, in order to be successful in public in the post-secular context, in which pluralism must be accepted as a norm, religious communities and citizens must develop what he called “epistemic stance[s] towards

- 1) [...] other religions and world views that they encounter within a universe of discourse hitherto occupied only by their own religion. They succeed to the degree that they self-reflexively relate their religious beliefs to the statements of competing doctrines of salvation in such a way that they do not endanger their own exclusive claim to truth.
- 2) [...] the independence of secular from sacred knowledge and the institutionalized monopoly of modern scientific experts. They can only succeed if from their religious viewpoint they conceive the relationship of dogmatic and secular beliefs in such a way that the autonomous progress in secular knowledge cannot come to contradict their faith.
- 3) [...] the priority that secular reasons enjoy in the political arena. This can succeed only to the extent that they convincingly connect the egalitarian individualism and universalism of modern law and morality with the premises of their comprehensive doctrines.” (Habermas 2006, 14)

Habermas, therefore, imagines that if religious communities want to be public and exist in pluralistic liberal democracies, they must accept and, to some extent, embrace this plurality on the grounds that

others will extend the same tolerance towards difference to them, in turn. Kristina Stoeckl argues, however, that there is an often-overlooked intermediary between the two binary poles of Habermas' idealized liberal religious communities and fundamentalists. She calls this group traditionalists. In her view, traditionalists self-consciously invert Habermas' principles:

- 1) "In debates on religious freedom and the visibility of religion in the public sphere, traditionalist actors often defend the privileged role and visibility of their religion at the expense of rights for minority religions or non-believers. They do so, however, not by publicly arguing that their belief is superior over the other, but by claiming that their belief is that of the majority.
- 2) Most traditionalists do not dispute the independence of secular knowledge directly, but they advance claims that they borrow from the pluralism within scientific discourse, which questions the independence of knowledge and describes it as the product of power-structures.
- 3) The third step is about reconciling religious doctrine 'with the egalitarian individualism and universalism of modern law and morality'; i.e. it is about connecting religious doctrine and individual human rights in modern secular societies." (Stoeckl 2016, 37)

Claiming that all who choose not to engage in a liberal manner are fundamentalists is, in Stoeckl's view, a significant and counterproductive oversight that obscures the complex dynamics of secularization and desecularization occurring in the majority of the Orthodox world. This dissertation will argue that these three stances that typify traditionalist engagement – privileging Orthodoxy, challenging secular (in this case, scientific and medical) knowledge, and articulating the exercise of religion in terms of human rights – were all visible in the Patriarchate's challenge to the State catalyzed by the Coronavirus.

Finally, it is necessary to discuss the other pole: fundamentalism. This dissertation uses the definition developed by the Fundamentalism Project, a five-volume series that brought together examples of fundamentalisms from various world religions to understand their commonalities. Appleby, one of the principal editors of the project, argued that fundamentalism has five main features:

1. It reacts to the marginalization of religion;
2. It is highly selective in the manner in which it engages with tradition and modernity;
3. Fundamentalism is Manichean in its moral understanding of the world;
4. Fundamentalists make absolutist claims;
5. It is marked by the adoption of messianism and the belief that one community alone can save humankind (Appleby 2009).

Therefore, fundamentalism is the extreme form of counter-secularization and produces an outlook on the world which is, at its core, impossible to reconcile with modern pluralistic societies without either recreating them in their own image or seeking complete isolation. Fundamentalism can take violent forms, but it is not necessarily so.

2.2 Orthodox Church-State Relations: From *Symphonia* to Entanglements

The primary lens through which Orthodox Church-State relations is traditionally viewed is *symphonia*, a political theology first articulated in the Byzantine Empire. The Greek term *symphonia*, meaning "accord" or "agreement," was used in pre-Christian medical texts to denote a state of balance between the various humors in a human body. One of the earliest examples of non-medical usage was

Eusebius of Caesarea (263-339 BCE) applied the term widely when referring to concord or balance. *Symphonia* acquired a political dimension in the Byzantine era (Hovorun 2017, 282). In contemporary usage, however, it denotes a formal separation of the State and the Church, but in which the two institutions enjoy one another's support and share the goal of ensuring the physical and spiritual welfare of a country's population. This is, notably, not a description of the actual state of affairs during the Byzantine era, but rather a *prescription* for an ideal formulation that would maximize human flourishing through alignment of the worldly (profane) and holy (divine) hierarchies in what the Geanakoplos characterized as "an imitation of the divine order in heaven" (Geanakoplos 382). It can alternatively be understood as a covenant with God ensured by those in power on Earth.

However, the lack of a practical definition or set of concrete guidelines for the concept's application has permitted widely divergent interpretations of *symphonia* by political and ecclesiastical leadership (Jianu 2020). As Cyril Hovorun characterizes it: "the church and state merged for the majority of the Byzantines into a single theopolitical entity" (Hovorun 2017, 289). He further elucidates how this arrangement entailed significant governmental oversight over matters of religious doctrine. In the Balkan context, the extensive powers enjoyed by Orthodox Churches today did not come about until the establishment of the Ottoman millet system, in which the Patriarch served as a representative of the Eastern Orthodox Christian minority population. Hovorun further assesses that, following the experience of the separation of Church and State (the differentiation phase of secularization), "no single model of symphony from premodern times would satisfy the [contemporary] churches" (Hovorun 2017, 296). Many primates and politicians in majority-Orthodox countries claim that symphony is a guiding principle for Church-State relations to this day or have sought to revive what they understand as elements of this principle.² Given that the Orthodox world was never unified under a single government, and autocephalous churches generally regard themselves as "the historic repository of nationhood, national values, and quite often, as the savior of a nation's very existence" (Radu 1998), voices that call for the implementation of symphonic ideals in Russia, Romania, and Georgia, for example, are reaching into very different idealized pasts. While perhaps influenced by transnational dialogue within the broader Eastern Orthodox community, Church and State leaders articulated historical models of *symphonia* in distinct ways on a local basis, and understandings of the term's implications have been handed down through linguistically discrete religious and philosophical traditions (Roudometof 2013).³

² This idea is most openly endorsed in the modern day by the Russian Orthodox Church. Both politicians and church leadership focused on *symphonia* at Patriarch Kirill's enthronement in Moscow in 2009 (Grdzeldidze 2010, 163).

³ Contemporary thinkers from within the church tend to frame these dynamics in prescriptive terms. *Symphonia* is often described in a metaphorical sense as, for example, a functioning body (the State) that is animated by the soul (the Church), leading to spiritually and politically healthy habits in the population. It is also common in Orthodox thinking to present analytical models for politics rooted in symbolism from religious doctrine. For example, Kakhaber Kurtanidze, a Georgian Orthodox priest and academic, has proposed a "trinitarian" model for understanding Church-State relations, a triad of "State-Church-Society," marked by peaceful coexistence and mutual

Despite its importance in the historical legacy and study of Eastern Orthodoxy, *symphonia* is an ambiguous and analytically challenging concept to approach. It is often misinterpreted by journalists and non-theologians alike as a state of permanent agreement or concord between Church and State. It is better to describe *symphonia* as a normative concept or ideological stance, which makes it, by definition, vague. In practice, efforts to fuse Church and State goals have always entailed a great deal of conflict. To address this issue, Koellner proposes analyzing Church-State relations through “entanglements” as opposed to *symphonia*. He roughly categorizes entanglements as existing on the “personal, ideological, and institutional” levels. Personal entanglements are close relationships between ecclesiastical and political elites. Ideological entanglement is a convergence of worldviews or a set of shared values between Church and State actors. Finally, institutional entanglement refers to the formal legal agreements between the Church and the State (Koellner 2020, 8). After assessing the literature and interviewing theologians for this project, this dissertation rejects the use of the historically amorphous notion of *symphonia* as an analytical tool and instead tries to conceive of ties between religions and States as entanglements. This allows observers to disambiguate the specific mechanisms of mutual influence involved in contemporary Church-State relations and simplifies cross-denominational comparison.

Demonstrating multi-level and deep entanglements has proven to be very important to State and Church actors in Georgia. The Church is deeply entangled with the State on an institutional level (see section 4.2). Politicians also strive to perform intimacy with Church figures by, for example, individually visiting the Patriarch and hosting clergy at election events. They also perform ideological consonance through highly publicized manifestations of personal piety and speeches which reinforce the State’s support of the Church. To this repertoire of official engagement, one can also add what Stoeckl refers to as the “hybrid” dimension of Church-State relations (Stoeckl 2018). She discusses how the ROC interacts with the State through selective cooperation, seeking the status of a State Church, and, sometimes, disassociation. Hybridity entails the Church being able to operate to present its views and achieve its political goals at several levels simultaneously, both in public and behind closed doors, or through the cooption or cooperation with external actors.

2.3 State of Emergency

Many observers have highlighted that the suspension of rights and norms resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic qualifies as a “State of Exception,” a specific condition when the standard order is placed on hold, usually under the auspices of emergency powers, due to a crisis that may threaten the State and the Constitution (Hussain 2020; Andronikashvili 2020a; Nunes 2020). This removal of administrative and legislative barriers empowers the primary leader in a

reinforcement. He advocates for this model as an analytical tool because it is explicitly non-secular and centers what he understands to be collective understandings of ritual and symbols (Kurtanidze 2011).

country to rule by decree. Rousseau traces the history of this practice back to Roman Law, arguing that emergency powers can allow governments to weather periods of acute crisis more successfully, provided that this “dictatorship” is both temporary and revocable (Rousseau 1923, bk. IV, chapter VI). In most modern countries, this need is anticipated in the constitution, which establishes how the state of emergency may be triggered.⁴

States of exception, by their definition, open a chasm of vulnerability: the population is at greater risk because many of their typical rights are suspended, and the Constitution is at greater risk because checks and balances that typically limit abuses of power are removed. Carl Schmitt famously defined the Sovereign in a country as the person who is empowered to “decide what is an exception *and* to make the decision appropriate to the exception” (Schmitt 1985, 13). Although Schmitt wrote primarily on the question of national sovereignty, in the present case, a combination of supranational regulations and local articulations thereof drove governments to take extreme measures limiting the citizen’s personal freedoms to protect them. In their case study focusing on the WHO’s response to the SARS crisis, Hanrieder and Kreuder-Sonnen argue that an “emergency trap” is triggered by discretionary declarations of health emergencies made by international organizations (IOs). These cause securitization on the national level, including declarations of a state of emergency in cases where the epidemiological situation might not wholly justify such severe measures. The authors thus advocate for constitutional “containment” of the emergency powers of IO’s on the national level (Hanreider and Kreuder-Sonnen 2014). The response to the transnational threat of the novel Coronavirus fits into this paradigm – many countries submitted to economically damaging and limiting lockdowns due simply to a lack of reliable information.

It is beyond the scope of this paper is to question the proportionality of the measures taken in the Republic of Georgia to the threat posed by the virus. That will not be known for years. However, the state of emergency should be understood as one of the most extreme tools in a government’s arsenal to demand compliance from institutions and individual citizens. The state of emergency had only been triggered once before in recent Georgian history.⁵ By challenging public health officials, the GOC was *de facto* entering into a debate over the appropriateness of the measures taken, and it appeared as though the leadership of a single

4 In the Republic of Georgia, the Parliament can approve a state of emergency in response to “war, mass riot, infringement upon territorial integrity of the country, military coup d’état, armed rebellion, ecological catastrophe, epidemic, natural calamity, gross breakdown, epizootic, and in other circumstances where the public authorities are not able to normally exercise their constitutional powers” (“Law of Georgia: On the State of Emergency” 1997).

5 Saakashvili called a state of emergency in 2007 in response to mass anti-government protests in Tbilisi.

religious community was able to dictate policy through refusal to bend to external pressures. This was a local version of one of the most significant issues that emerged at this moment globally – frustration with perceived inequalities in the application of emergency regulations.

3. Methodology and Methods

3.1 Methodological Approach

As the events of the Spring of 2020 were unfolding, I elected to conduct a qualitative case study of the Easter conflict in the Republic of Georgia. This research highlights the challenges of approaching socio-political problems in real-time: the events drew me in before I understood the angle I intended to approach them from or what this was a case of. Therefore, I began this project by casting with a wide net and tried to use inductive field research to investigate the research problems from a number of different angles. This distinctly non-linear process involved oscillating between data-gathering, consulting different historical and theoretical directions, and returning back to the data. This process has defined how I approached the case (Lund 2014). Although it is a risky choice for a novice researcher, given the evolving situation and the lack of modern historical analogs, an exploratory approach seemed to be the most appropriate option for the episode at hand.

This essay draws inspiration from the work of Kristina Stoeckl, Dmitri Uzlaner, and Alexander Agadjanian under the auspices of the *Postsecular Conflicts* project, which analyzes, broadly speaking, contemporary religious-moral conflicts, primarily using the case of the Russian Orthodox Church. Stoeckl addresses these questions through a disciplinary approach that she calls the *political sociology of religions*, which emphasizes bringing sociological methodologies in conversation with comparative politics (Stoeckl 2018, 222–23). Therefore, primarily through discourse analysis and case studies, these projects analyze the ROC as a political actor domestically and dissect how the institution articulates its political goals and moral visions internationally through transnational conservative networks. As I was interested in understanding the internal pressures behind, ideological significance of, and techniques through which religious actors express themselves politically, I elected to use a similar approach. This dissertation represents a lateral application of concepts developed in the *Postsecular Conflicts* project. It contributes to the field by using ideas formulated through empirical studies of the ROC, in the analysis of a different Orthodox community, and one which has an ambivalent and complex relationship to the ROC (Batiashvili 2020).

Several scholars working on Georgia have successfully conducted sociological qualitative case studies of particularly illustrative and symbolically meaningful episodes of collision between the Church and the State. These include, for example, Barbare Janelidze's characterization of the relationship between the United National Movement (UNM) and the Church, which she explored using the case of the conflict that emerged in 2011 over the adoption of a new law on

the legal registration of minority religious (Janelidze 2014). Another example was Michael Long's analysis of the politics of monument restoration in Georgia, which utilized the case of the reconstruction of Bagrati Cathedral (Long 2017). The latter two focus primarily on Church-State relations, although they treat the Church as an independent political actor. Small-n comparisons of the rhetorical discursive strategies of different Churches are also very fruitful. For example, Shota Kakabadze and Andrey Makarychev's analysis of how the Orthodox Churches of Georgia and Russia interact and engage with Europe is a particularly illustrative example of this type of study (Kakabadze and Makarychev 2018). While a small-n comparative approach may have been appropriate in this case, I elected to focus on a single case to present it in greater detail and with richer contextual information. One of the powerful results of this type of single study or very small-n analysis is that it allows the researcher to explore the external impacts of phenomena typically regarded as internal to religious communities or ignored entirely (for example, participation in ecumenical movements).

3.2 Methods and Data Sources

I elected to use a mixed-methods approach for this project. To understand the views of the Church and its critics, I surveyed media coverage, conducted discourse analysis on the official statements of the Patriarch and his press corps, and also held four in-depth interviews with theologians and members of the scholarly community. To simplify the isolation of themes across diverse data sources, I used NVivo software. This spread of sources allows me to present the contours of the Easter conflict as different parties understood it.

3.2.A. Media Coverage

To find interview subjects and develop a case timeline, analyzed and coded all coverage about Church-State relations in eight online news sources, including five based in Georgia and three covering the larger Caucasus region. Articles consulted extended from February through mid-June 2020. This includes the appearance of the first case of COVID-19 within Georgia's borders and extends beyond the end of the national state of emergency on May 21st. They were selected by manually going through the archives of all news from this period on the website. I double-checked and added to this selection using keyword searches of the terms "*church*," "*religion*," "*Patriarch*," "*priest*," "*spoon*," "*coronavirus*," and "*emergency*" in the language of the site. The news sites utilized included daily coverage and opinion commentary from:

-*JAM News*,⁶ *OC Media*,⁷ *EurasiaNet*,⁸ and *Interpress News Georgia*⁹ in English;

-*Ekho Kavkaza*¹⁰ and *Kavkazsky Uzel*¹¹ in Russian;

-*NetGazeti*,¹² and the “Verbatim” section of the online magazine *Tabula*¹³ in Georgian

Where necessary, I consulted coverage from other sources like *Civil GE* and *On.Ge* to gather more context. Many of these articles included similar quotes and stories taken from television appearances of priests and government officials. Given the diversity and polarization that marks the Georgian media landscape, I deliberately sought news sources representing different sides of the political spectrum for this analysis. In total, approximately 750 web pages were analyzed.

3.2.B. Patriarchate Statements

To understand the positions of the Church, I systematically analyzed all statements and news releases on the official website of the Patriarchate published between February and June of 2020. The institution’s output was 24 documents during this period, including letters from the Patriarch to the population, published sermons, Decisions of the Holy Synod, and Statements from the Patriarchate’s press corps. Two publications were not relevant to the present case and were excluded from analysis but still included in the data set.

3.2.C. Semi-Structured Expert Interviews

Interviews were conducted through Zoom calls in English and then transcribed and analyzed. Four interviewees were selected for their topical expertise:

6 JAMNews is a Georgia-based online news site published in five languages (Georgian, English, Russian, Armenian, and Azerbaijani) that is relatively centrist. They provide news coverage and analysis with a particular focus on reducing cross-border conflict in the Caucasus.

7 OC Media is an independent, Tbilisi-based, left-leaning online news site published in English and Russian.

8 *Eurasianet* is a non-profit independent news organization based at Columbia University’s Harriman Institute.

9 *Interpress News* is part of the Palitra Media group, which has existed since the 90s. Palitra is the largest group of news organizations in the country, and its owners are related to former Minister of the Economy and Sustainable Development under Georgian Dream, Dimitri Kumsishvili.

10 “Echo of the Caucasus” is an outlet of Radio Liberty, funded by the United States government.

11 “The Caucasian Knot” was founded as a project of the *Memorial* NGO in the Russian Federation.

12 *Netgazeti* is the national edition of the independent newspaper *Batumelebi*, which is based in the region of Ajara. *Batumelebi* and *Netgazeti* are both critical of the government.

13 “Verbatim” republishes quotes and commentaries from prominent individuals in the Georgian political landscape, endeavoring to put forward a range of opinions on a single topic. *Tabula* is a magazine founded by libertarian businesspeople with an explicitly pro-Western orientation.

-Levan Abashidze, a theologian and member of the analytical research group under the Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church. Due to his proximity to the institution, Abashidze is frequently invited to discuss and contextualize the Patriarchate's decisions in Georgian media.

-Zaal Andronikashvili, a literary studies scholar who has written extensively on the cultural history of Georgia and the Black Sea region. Andronikashvili is currently publishing a book of original research about the structural transformations of the institution of the Patriarchate and the Georgian Orthodox Church over the past century.

- Tamara Grdzeliidze, a theologian, is known for her work on the history of the GOC, ecumenism and Orthodoxy, and various issues relating to theology. She spent over a decade working at the World Council of Churches in interfaith dialogue and was appointed as the Ambassador to the Holy See from Georgia in 2014.

-*Interviewee 4* is a religious studies scholar from a university in Tbilisi specializing in popular religion and Church-State relations in contemporary Georgia. This individual preferred to remain anonymous.

All of the individuals listed above were chosen because they conduct research on and, in some cases, with the GOC or had written public statements about this episode. Although their insights and explanations were solicited to provide context to the case at hand, the former three were also participants in the societal discussions that erupted over these issues. Those who study a specific subject in depth are typically wont to share their expertise with the general public where it is relevant, and the emotionally and politically charged nature of the topics at hand was omnipresent in these discussions. Some interviewees shared that they are Orthodox believers and discussed their personal feelings and actions over the Easter conflict. I endeavored to make a safe and comfortable environment for interviewees, informing them that their participation is voluntary. Although the School Ethics Forum at the University of Glasgow initially only approved of conducting interviews on the condition of anonymity, several interviewees requested that they be named, which led me to reapply for ethical approval. Therefore, I offered interviewees the opportunity to be either identified publicly or anonymized and explained that they could withdraw consent to use interview data at any time. Please see Appendices III and IV for a copy of the Plain Language Statement given to interviewees and a list of topics discussed.

I also expect that participants' views on the relative success or failure of the Church-State agreement, and governmental policy in the earliest days of the pandemic, more broadly, were influenced by the situation on the ground when I conducted interviews. Interviews took place in the Winter of 2020, amid the second wave of the virus in Georgia and after hotly contested

parliamentary elections in October, in which the Georgian Dream party claimed a majority of seats and the opposition refused to participate.

3.3 Limitations

One of the most significant potential pitfalls of analyzing Church-State relations during a pandemic and state of emergency is that this period is, by its very definition, extraordinary. How accurate can a momentary snapshot assessment of a dynamic relationship be? In response to this question, I would emphasize that, at the time of writing, it appears likely even in optimistic scenarios that periodic mandatory lockdowns will be a feature of government policy until 2022. Therefore, the determination that religions are not subject to the law on the state of emergency is still relevant for the immediate present. In addition, analyzing how and why institutions dissent during public health emergencies may provide some insight into approaches that governments can take in the future to mitigate risk. Moreover, religious groups are often politically powerful and culturally significant institutions. The actions of leadership, be they secular or religious, carry great symbolic weight precisely during moments of crisis.

Space was also a limiting factor. While this type of project may have been more productive from a regional perspective if it were designed as a small-n comparison between two or three countries, it became clear that Religion-State interactions tend to be some of the most specific, heterogeneous, and contextually bounded forms of statecraft. The political goals of religious institutions are very dependent on local conditions and the type of government that they are engaging with. Even within the subset of post-Soviet majority Orthodox states, the dynamics of Church-State relations differ radically across countries.

Thirdly, this project relies solely on online text-based online news sources. This decision was made for language reasons and due to a lack of access to regularly aired television content. Georgia's media landscape is deeply polarized along party fault lines patterns of individualized news consumption. While social networks, and Facebook, in particular, seem nearly ubiquitous in Georgia (Statista Research Department 2021) and the majority of households have access to a smartphone and a color TV as of 2020, it is still true that the choice to focus on online news sites will skew data towards what was viewed by younger, wealthier, city-dwelling Georgians. Meanwhile, those who are older, less socioeconomically advantaged, and from rural areas rely more on the television and radio for news ("Freedom on the Net 2020: Georgia" 2020).

Finally, I am limited by my language abilities. I speak English natively, Russian fluently, and Georgian at an elementary level. Some sources were only available in Georgian. Where

necessary, I have relied on machine translation and checked my interpretations and renderings through news coverage in other languages that I do speak.

3.4 Significance

Although there has been much turnover in the Prime Ministerial position, which formally regulates the State's relations with religious organizations, the Georgian Dream party had, in the Spring of 2020, been in power for almost eight years. This thesis represents a modest and preliminary attempt to document a historical event and analyze the behavior of the Church and the State during this period. As one of many studies on these episodes of conflict, this will hopefully provide some insight into how this era will be understood in the future.

Moreover, this moment is also a particularly vulnerable one for the Church. Patriarch Ilia II is the longest-serving head of the Church in its entire history. The deep respect that he commands is unparalleled, and the question of how Church leadership will manage the ideological divides among the clergy without him remains to be answered.

In this study, I have attempted to combine theoretical approaches from different fields – sociology, law, political science, and religious studies – to analyze the Church as a political actor. I was intrigued by the opportunity to write about a kind of natural experiment or bellwether case unfolding in real-time, in which different autocephalous Orthodox Churches simultaneously grappled with the same challenge but yielded very different results. The Georgian Church is an interesting case because its internal dynamics are rarely examined in connection to broader ideological trends in Orthodoxy. The contemporary nature of the subject matter will certainly influence the results of this study. Indeed, the virus is still spreading rapidly throughout the world at the time of writing, and the same religious communities and ruling political parties are active.

Chapter 4. Contextual Information

4.1 Brief History of Georgia and the Georgian Orthodox Church

In this section, three distinct yet intertwining threads are presented in one continuous narrative: the histories of Georgian statehood, the Georgian Orthodox Church, and contemporary Georgian nationalism. I do not argue for a specifically religious reading of Georgian history but hope to elucidate how the Church and the State developed side-by-side over centuries. Rather than providing an exhaustive overview, the narrative focuses on moments that have become cultural touchstones, or otherwise usable pasts, in contemporary national history writing and nationalist discourse.

4.1.A The Adoption of Christianity and Establishment of the Bagrationi Dynasty (300 – 1800 CE)

Georgia's territory today roughly corresponds to the ancient polities of Svaneti, Colchis/Lazica (1200 – 164 BCE), and Kartli/Iberia (302 BCE – 580 AD) combined. In the first quarter of the fourth century CE, King Mirian III officially adopted Christianity as the state religion of Kartli/Iberia, following the teachings of St. Nino, a missionary from Cappadocia. Although the exact origins of the Georgian alphabet are a matter of historical and linguistic debate, the earliest known inscriptions in the language date back to the fifth century CE, and it is widely accepted that the script was developed to translate the Bible into Georgian (Rayfield 2013, 38–41). Thus, both the history of the Georgian language and the written historical record of Georgia are inseparable from the Orthodox Church. Much of the lexical wealth of Georgia's literary tradition developed in correspondence with Greek and through the translation of religious texts (Doborjginidze 2014). Although the Eastern Georgian Orthodox Church was autocephalous, or self-governing, as early as the sixth century, the Western part of the country, the Byzantine province of Lazica, was under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchate in Constantinople. Priests in the latter region conducted services in Greek until the early eleventh century, when King Bagrat III unified the two territories. The ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Georgian Orthodox Church expanded along with the State's political boundaries, and in 1010, Melkisedek I became the first Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia.

This consolidation ushered in the “Golden Age” of the Kingdom of Georgia. This period saw the reigns of King David the Builder and Queen Tamar, both representatives of the Bagrationi dynasty. During this era, many of the most significant centers of Georgian Christianity, such as the Svetitskhoveli Cathedral in Mtskheta and the Gelati Monastery complex,

were either constructed or greatly expanded. The legitimacy of the Bagratid dynasty, which extended until the end of the eighteenth century, was rooted in medieval political theology, based on the Church's support of a consecrated monarch (Maisuradze and Andronikashvili 2010). David the Builder, notably, established the position of the *mtsignobartukebutses-chkondideli*, a type of vizier or proto-prime ministerial role typically filled by an archpriest of the Orthodox Church. This non-hereditary position incorporated ecclesiastical leadership into the State's decision-making processes. It also helped centralize power in a political climate marked by a sizeable landed noble class who often joined forces with local priests to challenge the crown's authority (Suny 1994, 34–35).

Following this period, the Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Georgia operated continuously and independently throughout the Mongol conquest of the thirteenth century and hundreds of years of rule by non-Christian empires, including the Mongols, Ottomans, and Safavid Persians. Despite not having political independence and being under various Muslim leaders, most Georgians maintained a Christian identity.¹⁴ The administrative structure of these empires and the religious educational system meant that the Orthodox Church became the primary repository of Georgian literary and artistic production in transnational and multi-ethnic imperial contexts.

4.1.B Russian Annexation and Early Nationalist Projects

After the Russian Empire annexed Georgia, Tsarist authorities spent the first half of the 19th century endeavoring to bureaucratically, economically, and socially integrate the territory into the fold of their empire. Despite having promised not to do so, Russian authorities abolished the Georgian monarchy and dissolved the autocephaly of the Georgian Orthodox Church, incorporating it into the Russian Orthodox Church. The justification for this action was that the Russian Empire did not formally distinguish between ethnic groups and categorized their diverse subjects primarily based on religion. During this time, priests performed the liturgy in Old Church Slavonic instead of Georgian, and several medieval Georgian churches and icons were repainted in the Russian style (Iagorashvili 2019). Although the various independent Eastern Orthodox Churches share foundational beliefs, the abolition of autocephaly is, in contemporary

¹⁴ The notable exception to this is the Black Sea region of Ajara, which was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire in the seventeenth century. Over the next two hundred years, many Ajarans converted to Islam, which has resulted in a significant Georgian Muslim minority residing near the Turkish border.

historiographical discourse, regarded as an extension of colonial power and a particularly grievous insult to the Georgian Orthodox Church.¹⁵

The first modern nationalist project in Georgia was initiated by the *tergdaleulebi*, or “those who have drunk from the Tergi/Terek River,” which physically marked the boundary between Georgia and Russia. This generation of hereditarily noble Georgian intellectuals was born during the 1830s and gained exposure to Western European enlightenment and nationalist ideals through their university education in St. Petersburg. Bristling at the supposed backwardness of their nation in the eyes of Russian administrative elites, the *tergdaleulebi* sought a positive, unifying, and modern cultural identity for Georgians and established projects to promote education in their own language and to prevent cultural Russification.

Georgian writer and nationalist Ilia Chavchavadze spearheaded this effort in the urban areas of the country. He is credited with the most succinct and oft-quoted definition of Georgianness: *mamuli* (“fatherland” or “territory”), *ena* (“language”), and *sartsmuneoba* (“faith”) (Mikaberidze 2015, 284). As Nodia explains, this list was not intended as an all-encompassing formula at the time of writing but was, instead, a commentary on the translation of a poem. This triad was lifted from its original context in the 1980s and associated with the growing nationalist sentiment of the late Soviet era (Nodia 2009, 88). There is significant evidence that the *tergdaleulebi* had a complex relationship with Christianity and that their nationalism was neither explicitly religious nor exclusionary on the basis of religion. Reisner emphasizes the impact that secular education had on this generation, stating that the “Georgian Orthodox religion, which provided the basic assumptions upon which their social and political institutions had been founded for centuries, now ceased to play its legitimizing role.” (Reisner 2009, 40). Moreover, although the “faith” in this formulation is typically understood to be Orthodox Christianity, it is important to note that Chavchavadze explicitly supported the inclusion of Muslim Ajarans into the Georgian national project, even advocating for the application of sharia law in some contexts (Pelkmans 2006, 99).

It can be surmised that the *tergdaleulebi* regarded the Church as an important historical organizing structure or *lieu de memoire* for Georgians. This view is bolstered by Manning, who discusses the prevalence of imagery of the ruins of medieval Georgian Orthodox Churches and monasteries in nineteenth-century Georgian literature, charting their transition from an object of

¹⁵ See, for example, Zurab Kutateladze’s account of the history of the Church’s autocephaly from an academic journal published by a theological academy associated with the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, in which he states that the 19th century brought “not only physical subjugation but spiritual enslavement” to the Georgian Orthodox Church (Kutateladze 2019, 149)

romantic and sublime imagining into a site of archaeological exploration (Manning 3-17, 2008). Although the *tergdaleulebi* were not seeking independence from the Russian Empire, the destruction of the material and ecclesiastical tradition of the Georgian Orthodox Church served as a symbol of the Russian colonial yoke in the Caucasus. Much like the liberal intelligentsia of other ethnicities in the Russian Empire, they pushed for political reform, the abolition of serfdom, greater respect for regional autonomy, and some early notions of human rights.

In fin-de-siècle Georgia, although the autocephaly of the Church had been dissolved, seminaries and religious education were still incubators of diverse and radical thought. Following the Polish Uprising of 1863, Tsarist authorities, wary of nationalist movements, instituted harsh Russification policies. This was highly offensive to the overwhelmingly Georgian student body in seminary schools, and many of the most significant political leaders, nationalists, and socialist agitators of the era trace their roots back to the religious educational system.¹⁶ The Georgian clergy was regarded with distrust by their Russian leadership, and those suspected of supporting Georgian autocephaly were arrested. This issue came to a head in 1908, when Archbishop Nikon, the Russian Exarch of Georgia, was assassinated in his residence in Tbilisi, after which many Georgian priests were removed from their posts under suspicion of having collaborated with the murderers. Amid February Revolution in 1917, a group of Georgian clergymen declared the autocephaly of the GOC once more. From 1918 to 1921, Georgian social democrats embarked upon the first project of national self-determination in several centuries. They founded the Democratic Republic of Georgia, a paradigm shift that established independence as a normative idea for Georgians (Nodia 2018, 53). During this period, the Orthodox Church also reasserted its independence from its Russian counterpart. In 1921, however, the Red Army invaded, and Georgia was incorporated into the Soviet Union.

4.1.C Soviet Georgia: The Failure of Forced Secularization

The early Soviet period was marked by a forced secularization campaign and massive repressions of religion. The radical new government sponsored the physical destruction of places of worship, promoted atheism through the “Union of the Militant Godless,” and criminalized open involvement in religious communities, forcing religious practice underground and wiping out an entire generation of ecclesiastical authorities across the USSR (Dragadze 1993, 150). Early Soviet ideologues believed that all religious communities were socially regressive but that

¹⁶ These figures included Noe Zhordania, Ioseb Jughashvili (Joseph Stalin), and Silibistro Jibladze (Suny 2020, 42–50).

ethnically-based religions promoted a particularism that contradicted the aims of their project, making them dually dangerous (S. F. Jones 1989). In his sociological analysis of the failure of the forced secularization project in the Soviet Union, Paul Froese argues that, as the State forged a socialist identity, authorities endeavored to drain the religious meaning from traditions and refill them with newly sacralized atheist civil content. The contents of this new Soviet civil religion were scientific atheism and Marxist-Leninist teachings. This included, most famously, secularizing religious holidays and designing new ones that reified Soviet power (rather than attending church on Easter, a good Soviet citizen would participate in May Day parades). Despite all of these efforts, however, there is ample evidence that, for many, religion was simply privatized and individualized (Dragadze 1993) in a form of passive resistance or “inner emigration” (Agadjanian 2001, 351).

During World War II, the policy of official atheism was reversed, and religious organizations were formally permitted to return to the public sphere. On Stalin’s orders, the Russian Orthodox Church recognized the autocephaly of its Georgian counterpart in 1943 (Corley 1996, 130; Suny 1994, 284). In the years that followed, religious groups remained under significant pressure and surveillance. State security services co-opted national churches and muftiates to maintain a lever of population control domestically and conduct espionage abroad. They used ecumenical organizations such as the World Council of Churches to advocate for Soviet points of view on an international stage (Corley 1996, 291).¹⁷ Stoeckl argues that the experience of religious groups with socialist authorities, but the ROC, in particular, was marked by four primary forms of interaction that co-occurred: “repression, dissidence, collaboration, and emigration” (Stoeckl 2020).

Despite this history of collaboration with the State, however, churches in many parts of Socialist Eastern Europe also amassed counter-culture credibility as some of the only organizations that were not, as far as the general public could tell, controlled by the State (Bociurkiw 1986; Johnston 1993). Religion and “secular dissidence” provided two potential alternative moral poles to the ideology and values promoted by the Soviet State (Wanner 2011, 218–19). Since religious organizations suffered visible repression, to many, “the claim for religious freedom acted as a general claim for freedom of thought during and against the

¹⁷ Materials released as a part of a parliamentary commission conducted by the Russian State Duma in the 1990s largely confirmed suspicions of collaboration between the KGB and Armenian, Russian, and Georgian church authorities (“МАТЕРИАЛЫ КОМИССИИ ЯКУНИНА И ПОНОМАРЕВА 1990 ГОДА: Выписки Из Отчетов КГБ о Работе с Лидерами Московской Патриархии [Materials of the Yakunin and Ponomarev Commission of 1990: Extracts of KGB Reports about Its Work with the Leaders of the Moscow Patriarchate],” n.d.).

Communist regime” (Barberini 2016, 151). This caused a convergence of views with nascent human rights and nationalist movements. In the 1960s and 70s, a young and anti-regime Georgian intelligentsia began turning to the Church as a demonstration of dissent against the government and an indication of nationalist sympathies (Zviadadze 2016, 233; Alekseeva 2012). Active young clergy members also filled the ranks in this era, following the mass purges of religious leaders in the decades prior.¹⁸ Meanwhile, the Soviet Union’s participation in the Helsinki Accords pushed Moscow to include a clause on religious freedom as a human right in the new Constitution adopted in 1977 (Boiter 1987, 116–17). While in the Soviet Union, these groups could consider themselves to be on the same side, the conflict between the visions of a good life and government espoused by religious and secular (often, but not always, pro-Western) actors animates Georgian political discourse to this day.

As the National Liberation Movement headed by Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Merab Kostava, and other dissidents, became increasingly popular in the perestroika era, Georgian Church officials “openly reclaim[ed] their role in the spiritual leadership of the nation” (S. F. Jones 1989, 293; Janelidze 2014, 63). One of the most prominent examples of this took place on April 9th, 1989, which directly precipitated Georgian calls for independence from the USSR. During large anti-government demonstrations in Tbilisi, Patriarch Ilia II joined protesters on the street and called for peace, requesting that the crowds enter the Kashveti Church of St. George to avoid conflict. They refused to leave, however, and the Soviet army violently dispersed the crowd, which resulted in 21 deaths. In the post-Soviet era, these events are memorialized annually on April 9th, the Day of National Unity in Georgia, and the victims have been presented as martyrs for independence (Abzianidze et al. 2016, 209). The Church also memorializes this event, portraying the Patriarch as a witness to and participant in the most tumultuous periods of recent Georgian history, including the independence movement.

4.2. Post-Independence Church-State Relations

4.2.A. The 1990s

In contemporary Georgia, the Orthodox Church enjoys a privileged status legally, politically, and culturally. After declaring independence from the Soviet Union, the Republic of

¹⁸ Perhaps the first of this mold was Father Gabriel Urgebadze, who famously set fire to a poster of Lenin during the 1965 May Day parade in Tbilisi, accusing the crowd of idolatry (Oniani, n.d.). Father Gabriel was imprisoned in a psychiatric ward as punishment for this act. He lived until 1995 and was canonized in 2012 by the GOC. He was, throughout the 1990s and 2000s, one of the most famous figures in the contemporary GOC, inspiring a wide array of popular religious practices and legends (Zviadadze 2016)

Georgia experienced a Civil War marked by armed conflict between warlords, a coup d'état, and the loss of two regions. In short, the 1990s was a period of acute political and economic crisis and near state failure. President Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who began his career as a Soviet dissident, proclaimed a messianic ethnic Georgian nationalism and believed that Orthodoxy should be Georgia's "state religion." He also accused the "red clergy" of collaborating with the Soviet government against the people's interests (Chitanava 2015). Despite the relative prosperity of the Georgian SSR in the Soviet Union, by the mid-90s, the country was in ruins. In this context of complete institutional collapse, the GOC was one of the only poles of moral authority and guidance for a beleaguered population.

Eduard Shevardnadze recognized this and established a norm of the government relying on the Church for political legitimization. He was baptized by Patriarch Ilia II personally in 1992. Then, during a moment of political crisis, when Shevardnadze was the Chairman of the Parliament in 1993, the Patriarch expressed support for him. He stated, "The whole of Georgia is nervous. As the spiritual father of Georgia and personally your spiritual father, I have the right to give benediction to you to announce that you are the head of Georgia" (Chitanava 2015, 42). This partnership with the Church is usually attributed to the politician's sense of pragmatism rather than out of a strong sense of personal faith (Darchiashvili 2005, 173–74). Shevardnadze was officially elected to the Presidency in 1995 and was instrumental in creating the two most important documents that regulate the Church-State relationship in Georgia to this day: the 1995 Constitution and the 2002 Concordat, discussed in the following section in order of their legal precedence.

4.2.B. The Legal Basis of the Church-State Relationship in Georgia

The Constitution of the Republic of Georgia guarantees the right to equality and freedom from discrimination on the grounds of religion (Article 11) and to freedom of belief (Article 16). The document claims to reflect the principles established in the 1921 Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Georgia. This earlier Constitution established the separation of Church and State and prohibited discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities (Gunn and Nygaard 2015, 28–29). The 1995 Constitution includes Article 9, which notes the "outstanding role of the Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church in the history of Georgia, and its independence from the state." This article represented a compromise between more liberal forces, who preferred an entirely secular approach in the Constitution, and parts of the Georgian public who wanted tangible legal recognition of the Church's importance to the country (Nodia and Scholtbach 2006, 70–71). Constitutional recognition, which entails the

symbolic privileging of one community over others, is observed in Europe, the Orthodox world, and the former Soviet region.¹⁹

The second foundational document is the Constitutional Agreement, or Concordat, between the Republic of Georgia and the Autocephalous Orthodox Church. Signed into power by Shevardnadze and Patriarch Ilia II in 2002, this document outlines in more concrete terms the nature of the relationship between the two institutions. It establishes a norm that the State and the Church should “collaborate to ensure the welfare of the population maintaining the principle of mutual interdependence” (Article 1), as well as a series of practical agreements on the recognition of religious marriages and educational degrees, an exemption for clergy from military service, and religious education in schools. The Patriarch is granted legal immunity according to the Concordat. It also outlines that the Church’s tax-exempt status, that the State will provide monetary assistance to the Church as restitution for damages incurred during the Russian Imperial and Soviet eras, and the State’s responsibility for the care and management of Church properties, lands, and treasures. In terms of legal precedence, the Concordat is second only to the Constitution and the body of Constitutional law. This means that it takes priority over all international treaties and other national laws (Tsintsadze 2007, 751).

Various criticisms have been leveled against the Concordat since it was signed. Firstly, the imbalanced nature of the agreement and privileged status that it affords to the Georgian Orthodox Church has caused significant issues in the area of minority rights. The Concordat also represented a compromise – it was advocated for by liberal politicians who believed that it would be a way to avoid more restrictive laws on religion. In practice, however, international organizations, civil society watchdogs, lawyers, and representatives of religious minority communities argue that the contents of the Concordat are discriminatory because they legally privilege the Church above the rest of the population (Gunn and Nygaard 2015; Begadze 2017; Tsintsadze 2007). Despite Georgia’s robust and enthusiastic participation in the international promotion of human rights,²⁰ a document which, in essence, legalizes a discriminatory status quo remains in force domestically. Secondly, the financial dimensions of the Concordat have come under particular scrutiny in the past several years. This data was revealed to a broader

¹⁹ United Kingdom, Denmark, and Finland are included in the first category. The second group of Orthodox countries includes, for example, Greece and Bulgaria. Many post-Soviet states have constitutional recognition of a specific religious community *and* an official list of religious groups that are legally deemed “traditional” to the territory. This designation was designed to block foreign proselytism. Georgia does not have a special law on religions that establishes traditional faiths.

²⁰ For a complete list of all international treaties and agreements on human rights and non-discrimination that Georgia is a party or signatory to, consult Gunn and Nygaard (Gunn and Nygaard 2015, 31–39).

audience with the publication of a project called the “Patriarchate’s Capital,” which provided evidence of high levels of personal wealth among a number of Church hierarchs (Japiashvili, Lomadze, and Bakradze 2017). Critics argue that the wording of the Concordat enables a system ripe for abuse by political elites. Political leaders are frequently accused of engaging in a kind of quid-pro-quo agreement with the Church, providing funding to the Patriarchate and hierarchs through various means in exchange for their political support during election seasons. This status quo led Karlo Godoladze to argue in 2015 that Georgia could be best described as a “constitutional theocracy,” in which the policy of state secularism in the Constitution is consistently undermined by “orthodox theocratic narratives” seen in practice (Godoladze 2015, 195). Thus, the Concordat is the framework upon which various levels of entanglement between the State and Church are fleshed out and enacted.

4.2.C Post-Rose Revolution Church-State Relations (2004-2012)

Following the 2003 Rose Revolution, Mikheil Saakashvili was elected as the President of Georgia, and the United National Movement, the political party he founded in 2001, won a majority of the seats in the Parliament. UNM had a reformist agenda composed of policies designed to reduce corruption and strengthen the state. Part of the purpose of this was to facilitate Georgia’s geopolitical reorientation towards the EU and NATO. The Patriarch, notably, officially supported this westward shift. However, analysts generally agree that Church-State relations under the UNM government were characterized by conflicts that grew progressively more visible in Saakashvili’s second term, although the exact nature and reasons for this antagonism are a matter of some debate.

Literature on Church-State relations during the Saakashvili era generally holds that two national identity projects were developing simultaneously – one espoused by the Church and another by the State, and that much of the tension was due to incongruences between these visions of Georgia. Beginning in Shevardnadze’s era, the Church was engaged in a kind of re-expansion of religion into areas that had been forcibly secularized in the Soviet era – such as schools (Gurchiani 2017a). This period also saw an extensive campaign to construct new churches around the country (Manning 2008, 17). Serrano argued that the GOC was engaging in a literal and symbolic “desecularization” of the country through reclamation of the physical landscape and national heritage (Serrano 2010). In philosopher Giga Zedania’s view, the GOC began to articulate a kind of “religious nationalism,” according to which Orthodoxy is the primary constitutive attribute of Georgianness. Zedania further claimed that this was a form of backlash against what he characterized as a revolutionary civic nationalism espoused by UNM

(Zedania 2011, 124–25). Andronikashvili and Maisuradze also argued in 2010 that the GOC's nationalism, which both Shevardnadze and Saakashvili drew upon for legitimacy, was expansive, even absorbing and sacralizing secular figures in Georgian history like Ilia Chavchavadze, and fundamentally oriented towards the pre-modern past (Maisuradze and Andronikashvili 2010).

Questions of how the State engaged with these narratives from the Church and what type of nationalism typified each actor dominated scholarly debates of this era. Saakashvili endeavored to rebrand Georgia and introduced Christian imagery into the national repertoire of symbols.²¹ This prompted some, such as Tornike Metreveli, to argue that it would be more appropriate to characterize UNM's nationalism as hybrid in nature, as the conflation of Orthodox Christianity and Georgianness was not inclusive to the non-Orthodox part of the country (Metreveli 2016). Janelidze characterized the relationship as conflict-ridden, observing the interplay between top-down efforts at secularization and GOC-led pushes to desecularize (Janelidze 2014). This dynamic also changed over time due to external conditions. In his analysis of the reconstruction of the 11th century Bagrati Cathedral in Kutaisi, Long found that Saakashvili and the GOC were willing to sacrifice architectural fidelity and a spot on the UNESCO World Heritage List to create a symbol of national unity and rebirth out of the site following the 2008 war (Long 2017).

One scholar whose work has helped to bridge the gulf between these various views is Tamar Gamkrelidze. She argues that an agonistic dynamic, or productive conflict, marked the relationship between UNM and the GOC. In her view, President Saakashvili utilized a combination of “cooperation, persuasion, appeasement, and marginalization” to keep the Patriarchate and Church engaged in the State's “European project,” or goal of Euro-Atlantic integration (Gamkrelidze 2018, 272–73), which is now a dominant goal in Georgian political discourse (Kakachia, Lebanidze, and Dubovyk 2019). This, Gamkrelidze argues, allowed the State to limit the Church's role in the “cognitive structures” of the country while still gaining its support for an ambitious geopolitical reorientation. However, the Patriarch's acceptance of the European project has always been conditional, as he believes that the country should never have to compromise its traditional values or the “treasures” of Georgian culture to integrate into Europe (Batiashvili 2018, 16–18).

The GOC was also undergoing a dramatic shift internally during this period. A sense of insecurity in the newly-opened spiritual “marketplace” caused post-Soviet religious communities

²¹ For example, St. George is now on the presidential crest, and the five-cross flag was adopted soon after Saakashvili came to power.

to embark on aggressive “anti-cult” campaigns throughout the 90s and early 2000s. Many priests in the Russian Orthodox Church, for example, argued that foreign religious missionaries were “spiritual colonizers” (Baran 2006, 642–44). This tendency was also visible in the GOC in the late 1990s, when a radical wing rose to prominence. One of the first significant actions undertaken in Church-State relations after the Rose Revolution was the arrest of Basil Mkalavishvili and several followers of his²² in connection with a series of mob attacks that they carried out against religious minorities from 1999–2003 (*Human Rights Watch* 2005). Although the GOC publicly distanced themselves from these individuals, the Patriarch also labeled those who spread “sectarian doctrines” as “enemies of the nation” (Chitanava 2015, 43). Many clergy members, as well as much of the general public, were sympathetic to the offenders (Nodia and Scholtbach 2006, 71).

4.2.D Church-State Relations Under Georgian Dream (2012–2020)

Several significant changes have occurred in recent years in Religion-State relations that are worth noting, although the general paradigm of the ruling party relying on the Church for legitimacy has remained in place. In 2012, the Georgian Dream coalition, founded by businessman Bidzina Ivanishvili, came to power via parliamentary elections. Georgian Dream accepted the paradigm established by Shevardnadze and UNM of pursuing integration in both the EU and NATO. In 2014, the government established the State Agency for Religious Issues under the purview of the Prime Minister. The primary goal of this agency is to manage the relationships between religious communities and their interactions with the State. However, it has been criticized as ineffective, particularly by members of the Muslim community in Georgia (Aydingün, Köksal, and Kahraman 2019, 297–99). The GOC has also moved forward and signed memoranda of agreement with the Ministries of Justice and Education, which establish more concretely how the terms of the Concordat should be enacted (Jgharkava 2017, 7).

The question of the social responsibilities and duties of Church officials has come under scrutiny due to a number of scandals in recent years. Many priests publicly attended rallies supporting GD during the 2012 elections despite the Patriarchate’s official position of political neutrality (Chitanava 2015, 49). Similarly, on May 17th, 2013, a large number of

²² Mkalavishvili was defrocked by the GOC in 1995 and established an independent church in the Gldani suburb of Tbilisi. This Church is affiliated with the Church of the Genuine Orthodox Christians of Greece, a group that broke off from the Orthodox Church of Greece over the latter’s involvement in the ecumenical movement. After his 2004 arrest, Mkalavishvili was sentenced to six years in prison but was released in 2008 (*Blagovest Info* 2008). Since then, he has been preaching at the Gldani Diocese (“Diocese of Gldani Tbilisi (Georgia)” n.d.). The GOC considers this church to be schismatic.

counterdemonstrators, including priests, attacked a peaceful demonstration planned on the International Day against Homophobia. The Patriarchate condemned the attacks, and the Parliament was reluctant to investigate the violence (Crego 2014, 145).²³ In 2014, the Parliament adopted the Law on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination, which included a clause protecting gender equality and the rights of LGBT+ individuals. As the law was necessary to establish a visa-free regime with the EU, it was a high priority. The Church protested against the law's adoption, eventually receiving a small concession in the text that the Concordat could not be contradicted by the exercise of this law (Chitanava 2015, 50).

Although these cases are very different at face value, they both represent frontiers of secularization and counter-secularization in contemporary Georgian society. Should the clergy be considered private citizens or representatives of the Church when they attend political rallies? To what extent should Church officials engage in electoral politics? To what extent can groups of devout believers shape laws that impact the entire country? Should the Church be permitted to handle cases of criminal activity committed by clergy members internally, or should the State intervene? These are all questions currently being debated in Georgian society.

In a blog post about the present case, philosopher Zaal Andronikashvili, using a Schmittian definition of the state of emergency, argued that the Church was essentially anointing itself the sovereign through its decision to defy emergency regulations. (Andronikashvili 2020a). This argument is part of a broader narrative that he has developed in his work that the Church's primary goal in political engagement is to develop sovereignty or immunity within the State, to undermine its democratic order from within, and to establish a constitutional monarchy with the GOC as the state religion. He has recently completed a book about the institutional restructuring of the Church, which occurred during the Stalinist era, in which the more democratic Church Assembly was replaced with the institution of the Patriarchate. He argues that the current political project of the Patriarchate can be attributed to the institution's authoritarian past (Andronikashvili 2020b).

4.3. The Novel Coronavirus

4.3.A. COVID-19 in Early 2020

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) is an infectious disease first recognized in December 2019 in the Hubei province of the People's Republic of China. The Chinese government

²³ Five clergy members were arrested, but the charges against them were eventually dropped in 2015 after a protracted trial in the Tbilisi City Court (*Civil GE* 2015).

established strict lockdown measures relatively early on. The virus, however, began to spread rapidly across Asia and the rest of the world in early 2020. By March 11th, the World Health Organization officially declared that COVID-19 was a global pandemic (Adhanom 2020), and Italy and Iran were in the midst of deadly first waves. As the virus is being actively studied at the time of writing and knowledge continues to develop, this section provides a brief snapshot of what was widely known about this illness in early 2020.

Certain features of the COVID-19 were confirmed early on. When symptomatic, it typically presents like the flu, with respiratory issues, fever, sore throat, and loss of taste or smell. Because the illness targets the upper respiratory tract, it is transmitted primarily, although not exclusively, through droplets or vaporized virions coming into contact with and populating the mucous membranes of the face. Therefore, the WHO recommended donning face masks and maintaining a distance of two meters between individuals in public. The question of whether surface contact could cause transmission was unresolved at this point. The elderly and immunocompromised were considered the highest-risk populations.

COVID-19 was particularly challenging for public health authorities to address with traditional contact tracing methods. The original novel coronavirus has an exceptionally long incubation period of up to 14 days. Moreover, by late April 2020, it was already discussed in medical journals that asymptomatic transmission was possible, meaning that simply isolating individuals after symptoms appear is a useful but imperfect strategy (Gandhi, Yokoe, and Havlir 2020). Finally, basic data about viral behavior and mortality rates were lacking, which complicated policy decisions.

4.3.B. The Governmental Response to COVID-19 in Georgia

The General Director of the WHO, Tedros Adhanom, stated that countries must “strike a fine balance between protecting health, minimizing economic and social disruption, and respecting human rights” (Adhanom 2020). The Georgian response to COVID-19 was swift and, in keeping with European countries, marked by restrictions on movement and gathering. Central to their messaging was the expertise of several prominent medical professionals from the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention and the Ministry of Health. Officials like Amiran Gamkrelidze, Tengiz Tsertsvadze, Paata Imnadze, and Ekaterine Tikaradze became household names. Doctors shared daily updates on the status of individual patients to the press, underscoring that the Georgian Dream government’s policy was to defer to medical professionals. In a note that is particularly relevant to the topic of this study, both public health and government officials tried to negotiate directly with the Church. The early results of the

Georgian approach were assessed positively both domestically and internationally (*JAM News* 2020; Lomsadze 2020; *Foreign Policy* 2020; “EU Ambassador on Covid-19 in Georgia” 2020). By the end of May 2020, there had been approximately 4700 cases and 27 deaths in the country in total, significantly less than all neighboring territories (*OC Media* 2020b). This strict approach caused significant economic contraction but allowed Georgia to stave off the true first wave of the virus until Fall 2020 (*OC Media* 2020c).

4.4. Eastern Orthodoxy, Easter Traditions, and Physical Worship

The Eastern Orthodox Church, of which the Georgian Autocephalous Orthodox Church is one member, is comprised of a group of Churches that share their foundational beliefs but operate independently of one another. Each constituent church has its own Catholicos-Patriarch or Primate (leader) and its own Holy Synod (executive decision-making body). Although the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople is recognized as the *primus inter pares*, or “first among equals,” this authority is symbolic, and the Ecumenical Patriarch cannot exercise control over the internal affairs of other Orthodox Churches. Despite operating independently, however, Orthodox Churches consider themselves part of a broader community and share many worship practices and interpretive traditions. As COVID loomed, Orthodox Churches worldwide dealt with an almost identical set of problems – reconciling a deeply embodied and communally-oriented worship tradition with new social distancing mandates.

4.4.A. Easter in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition

Easter and the Holy Week preceding it are the most important collective celebrations of the entire year. These festivities in the Orthodox tradition take place in two main settings: the Church and the graveyard. Traditions involve gathering in the Church for Palm Sunday and performing a “liturgical passion play” over the Holy Week, “reenacting the final events in the life of Christ on Earth” (Harakas 2002, 15–21). The holiday culminates in an overnight vigil in the church on Saturday evening in anticipation of Easter Sunday, which celebrates the resurrection of Jesus. During this time, Orthodox tradition also holds that flames miraculously appear in Christ’s tomb in Jerusalem before Easter. This flame is spread across the city from candle to candle and is physically carried back home to Orthodox countries, where the fire is distributed among the population (Romey 2020).

It is also common for families to visit cemeteries to honor their deceased family members on or around Easter Sunday. There is significant regional variation in folk practices, but standard features involve cleaning gravestones, holding a celebratory meal outdoors, or

bringing offerings like candles, flowers, candy, or alcohol to graveyards (Shalvashvili 2018, 23; Otarashvili 2013). Across the Orthodox world, these festivities serve as a reason to travel to see one's family.

4.4.B The Physicality of Orthodox Worship

Eastern Orthodox Christianity is, generally speaking, highly “embodied” in its practices (Riccardi and Sokoll 2014), placing great emphasis on materiality, communal gathering, contact with ritually pure or holy objects, and physical conditioning through fasting and extended periods of performed prayer. For believers, all of these elements combine to create a transformative spiritual experience and are considered necessary to reap the full benefits of worship. Practices that directly conflicted with the new social distancing mandates across Orthodox communities included but were not limited to:

- a. *Communal prayer*: The importance of gathering for the liturgy cannot be understated in Eastern Orthodoxy. A priest traditionally sings the liturgy in its entirety, with the congregation joining in at various points.
- b. *The use of shared communion spoons and chalices*: Orthodox believe that sacramental wine and bread literally transform into the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Due to their holy and mysterious nature, sacramental offerings must be handled in specific ways which differ based on the community. In many Eastern Orthodox Churches, this usually means a serving spoon and chalice made of some form of precious metal, a practice that is presumed to date back at least a millennium based on archaeological excavations of Byzantine churches (Taft 1996).
- c. *Kissing icons and other religious items*: Orthodox Christians often attribute miraculous powers to icons. Kissing an icon or touching a relic is a means of accessing the divine or communing with God through a holy object. Viewing a reproduction or representation of an icon on a screen cannot and does not, in this tradition, carry the same spiritual benefit (Ponomariov 2016). The importance of physical proximity to icons and their capacity for spiritual protection is apparent in the common practice of icon marches, in which priests remove the icon or relic from its home in a church or reliquary to circumambulate areas in need of protection.

The emphasis on material objects mediating the human-divine experience extends to the buildings of Eastern Orthodox Churches, which are consecrated using physical relics from saints. In some strains of Georgian folk Christianity, the very stones and earth from the grounds of Churches are believed to be imbued with the power of holy patronage (Dragadze 1993, 149).

Due to this emphasis on material mediation in the Orthodox tradition, many priests and faithful alike believe that it is impossible to fall ill while standing in churches or that communion spoons and chalices cannot be sources of viral infection due to the holy nature of their contents (Anyfantakis 2020). In the past year, this physicality has been the subject of much debate in religious and secular communities in the Orthodox world.

4.4.C Online Services

The obvious response to mandated social distancing is broadcasting remote services via the internet, television, radio, or other media. However, a combination of theological specificities in Orthodox doctrine and cultural norms contributed to the reluctance of many hierarchs to transition to mediated forms of worship. The leadership of some Orthodox churches regards the internet as a ritually impure space (Suslov 2016), a stance which made them reluctant to practice online religion even as internet access and use spread among worshippers.²⁴ As Zviadadze notes, however, the past decade has seen a shift towards online religiosity among Georgian youth, who are less likely to engage in religious communities traditionally, but often incorporate religious imagery into self-identification on social media platforms (Zviadadze 2014). The GOC and many of its clergy maintain a robust presence in the media. Priests and monks regularly post their opinions and sermons on Facebook, make appearances on traditional television channels and online shows, and, in some cases, run their own YouTube channels. Archpriest Teodore Gignadze, for example, had over 230,000 followers in 2020²⁵ on Facebook and has been regularly streaming sermons and speeches to his followers for years (“მამა თეოდორე გიგნაძის ქადაგებები (Father Theodore Gignadze’s Sermons)” 2012). Priest-influencers help to “reinforce loyalty, knowledge, and ownership among believers” (Zviadadze 2014, 186) but also run the risk of contradicting the Patriarchate with their platforms. So, while specific theological and cultural barriers to using mediated forms of worship exist in Orthodoxy, it would

²⁴ In an early work focusing on religion on the internet, Helland distinguished between “online religion” and “religion online.” The former is the actual practice of spiritual activities in digital space (for example, streaming sermons or holding blessings online), as opposed to “religion online,” which entails information-giving and the facilitation of offline religious practices (Helland 2005). This distinction is helpful to keep in mind when discussing Orthodox Churches. Many are willing to share calendars and create Patriarchate websites but resisted, for example, posting videos of sermons online until relatively recently.

²⁵ This figure is impressive, considering that there are only approximately 3.7 million native Georgian speakers worldwide.

be erroneous to assert that the Church was incapable of making this transition. This is in sharp contrast to religious communities that eschew the internet entirely.²⁶

²⁶ Members of the Haredi (or “Ultra-Orthodox”) Jewish community in Israel continued to gather into April 2020 despite nationwide restrictions, causing some of the earliest clusters in the country. This happened, in part, because the belief system of this insular community forbids them from using the internet and accessing secular media. To address this gap, the Israeli government produced a targeted information campaign and deployed several military units to specifically enforce restrictions in majority Haredi neighborhoods (Harman, Maital, and Roeder, n.d.).

Chapter 5. Church Narratives

In this chapter, I first present a selection of representative statements from Church officials on issues pertaining to the coronavirus throughout the state of emergency and then discuss the implications of these positions. This chapter proposes that the GOC engages in political claim-making in a manner typical of traditionalists. They argue for a position that privileges Orthodoxy, challenges scientific knowledge, and articulates the right to gatherings and communion in terms of religious liberties or the rights of the individual believer. That all of these claims were accommodated by the government makes this case a significant recent example of formal desecularization. This chapter also explores the underlying ideological currents in the Church and posits that a compromise between traditionalists and fundamentalists led to the outcome in this case.

5.1 The Response of the Church

While one often sees statements such as “according to the Church ...” in the foreign and Georgian press, this synecdoche is not as simple as it might appear. Eastern Orthodox Churches feature a unique hierarchical structure that is internally regarded as an earthly reflection of the divine order in heaven. The foundational decision-making unit is the Holy Synod, a group of high-ranking clergy members who gather on a regular basis. The Holy Synod of the Georgian Orthodox Church comprises 47 members, most of whom are responsible for the pastoral ministry of a specific geographical area, called an eparchy. The Catholicos-Patriarch is the chairperson of the Synod and leader, but the collective determines the official positions of the Church.²⁷

Like any institution made up of individuals, the personal views of the Patriarch and clergy members may differ from the official positions of the Church as determined by the Synod.²⁸ Church matters and decisions often carry implications for the entire populace. As

²⁷ Although the Patriarch is often described as an Eastern Orthodox analog to the Roman Catholic Pope, this is an oversimplification that obscures significant theological and practical differences between the two groups of Christians. Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, which has a single Pope who is believed to be infallible on matters of doctrine, Eastern Orthodox Churches hold that their Patriarchs are human and therefore subject to error (T. Jones and Walker 2018). The powers of the Patriarch (and the Patriarchate as an institution) are dynamic: they vary between Orthodox Churches and, within the same Church, in different historical periods.

²⁸ In some cases, this type of disagreement occurs under the threat of schism. Perhaps the most prominent example of this was the 1997 withdrawal of the GOC from ecumenical movements, including the World Council of Churches and Council of European Churches. Prior to that, Patriarch Ilia II was personally deeply involved in the ecumenical movement and served as the co-president of the WCC from 1983-1991 (Tinikashvili 2019, 133–37). However, several bishops who shared anti-ecumenical beliefs drafted an open letter to the Patriarch, arguing that interconfessional dialogue is a form of heresy (“An Open Letter to Patriarch Ilia II of Georgia from the

discussed in Chapter 4, the Orthodox Church also receives funding directly from the State's budget. Thus, Synod decisions are followed closely in the Georgian media, and representatives of the Church regularly express their personal opinions to the press. This situation can lead to some confusion: if a priest makes a statement that contradicts the official position of the Church, and the Patriarchate or the Synod does not publicly rebuke or correct the individual in question, the general public sometimes interprets this as a kind of tacit institutional approval. As the pace of media coverage quickens, the question of who actually speaks on behalf of the Church has become more convoluted. This loose media policy causes significant discord amongst clergy members, including in this case (*On.Ge News* 2020b; Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church 2020b). In an effort to avoid the conflation of the positions of different categories of the hierarchy, the claims presented by the GOC and its various representatives are subdivided here into announcements of the Holy Synod, statements and sermons from the Patriarch or his office's press corps, and, finally, comments made by individual members of the clergy that were reported in the Georgian press. The latter draws on a set of about 210 quotes from members of the clergy made during this period.

5.1.A From the Holy Synod

At the end of an emergency meeting on March 20th, the Holy Synod released a statement sharing the Church's official positions relating to the coronavirus and the new emergency restrictions imposed by the government. They held that the "spiritual cause" of the illness is "man's distance from God" and framed the pandemic as a trial through which believers may learn about themselves and express their faith (Holy Synod of the Georgian Orthodox Church 2020). They accepted that the virus is a genuine threat to the security of the nation and asked that the population follow the advice of medical authorities. In addition, they recommended that believers keep holy water at home, read the Gospels, and recite specific sets of prayers individually as additional spiritual reinforcement.

The two most controversial aspects of this communique pertained to the red lines that the Church established: restrictions on mass gatherings and the use of shared spoons and chalices to serve sacramental bread and wine to parishioners. On the former point, the Synod never publicly entertained the option of stopping services but chose instead to recommend accommodations designed to reduce the risks associated with gathering. They gave approval for

Brotherhood of the Monastery of Saint Shio of Mghvime" 1997). As a result, and under threat of schism, the Church has since avoided participation in any ecumenical organizations aside from the Interreligious Council of the CIS (Tinikashvili 2019, 157) and interfaith dialogues organized by the State Agency for Religious Issues.

priests to conduct the liturgy outdoors on makeshift altars in Church courtyards, installed sound systems, and promoted social distancing among parishioners. They asked the ill, immunocompromised, and elderly to stay at home and follow along with services simultaneously and also established protocols for priests to provide individual assistance to parishioners, including home visits in extraordinary cases. The Synod weighed in on the importance of the eucharist and its centrality to the faith. They stated that it is “unacceptable for Church members to doubt the essence of the sacrament of communion and to express it in action – for example, to refuse to share a common spoon [out of belief that it is] a source of disease transmission” (Holy Synod of the Georgian Orthodox Church 2020). They did, however, allow believers to consume wine with single-use or personal glasses immediately following the communion bread, which was still served using a single metal spoon (Apriamashvili 2020).

In this same document, the Synod expressed its support of the government’s policies and the efforts of healthcare workers. They committed to providing “spiritual nourishment” to Georgians abroad and those living in the contested territories. Finally, the Synod underscored that any medical facilities owned by the Patriarchate would be made available to bolster the government’s efforts against the pandemic.²⁹

5.1.B From the Patriarchate

The views presented in this section come from a variety of sources: weekly sermons delivered by Patriarch Ilia II himself, published statements and comments from the institution’s website, and interviews with Archbishop Andria Jaghmaidze, the head of the Patriarchate’s public relations department. In keeping with the views later expressed in the March 20th decision of the Holy Synod, the Patriarchate consistently maintained that faith was necessary to combat the virus. In his March 1st sermon, Patriarch Ilia II shared a mystical vision that he had experienced and interpreted its meaning as a sign that humankind would overcome the virus with the assistance of God (*Tabula* 2020b). Throughout this period, he reaffirmed the Synod’s framing of the virus as a trial for believers which could not be beaten successfully without the

²⁹ It should be noted that the GOC independently operates a number of educational and medical facilities, including hospitals, orphanages, and schools, and receives both tax benefits and direct funding from the government to assist them in their mission (Japiashvili, Lomadze, and Bakradze 2017). Medical centers owned by the Patriarchate were, indeed, enlisted in the government’s response to the virus (Sapatriarkos Televizija “Ertsulovneba” 2020). One aspect of the Church’s activity that could be a fruitful subject for further research is how and whether the norms of the State of Emergency were implemented in these institutions owned by the Church, as some have been criticized in the past for failing to allow external oversight.

Church. He identified the estrangement of humans from the divine as a significant issue and asked the nation to unify around the Church both figuratively and literally:

“We must do all that we can to make our way to the Kingdom. We are told to stand at a distance. This is the means... the small means that the Lord has given us. [...] Whatever happens, stand at a distance, but stand around the Church. It’s all for you. All of this is easy to do. The main point is that we don’t separate from the Lord, that we are still with the Lord.” (Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church 2020c)

In this statement and others like it, the Patriarch emphasizes that believers should comply with those aspects of state public health directives that the Church determined necessary (mainly, maintaining physical distance during services and avoiding public worship activities if one was ill or elderly). He repeatedly thanked the government, healthcare workers, and the general population for their high level of social responsibility and efforts to keep the virus at bay. The Patriarchate also organized various tours of icons around the country and sprayed the streets of Tbilisi with holy water.³⁰

Patriarch Ilia’s most explicit statements on the matter are found in the Easter Epistle itself. In this sermon, he praised the development of local agriculture that occurred as a result of economic isolation and thanked God that religious services in Georgia, unlike in most other countries, were not disturbed:

“Thank God that the liturgy in churches in Georgia was not stopped, not even on Easter night. With the help of God, the help of doctors, the actions of the government, and the responsibility of the population, the pandemic did not cause us big problems. God willing, difficulties will not be created and in the future, [and] Georgia and the world will be saved from this ordeal. I cannot thank our parishioners, who, with their outstanding observance of order and recommended norms, did not shy away from standing in the open air for hours in the cold, wind, and rain [...] I would also like to bless those believers, the elderly and infirm, who have prayed and continue to pray with us from home” (Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church 2020g)

In this speech, the Patriarch demonstrates that the ability to continue services uninterrupted was the main priority of the Church.³¹ In the same sermon, he also discussed at length the

³⁰ The first of these tours occurred on March 17th, when Priests ritually purified the streets of Tbilisi with holy water to ward off the virus (*Georgian Orthodox Church Blesses Tbilisi Streets against Coronavirus* 2020). On March 26th, Archbishop Iakob of Bodbe took an icon of the Virgin Mary on a helicopter tour around Tbilisi (Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church 2020e). The Patriarchate also blessed the streets as a part of an annual tradition marking the Day of Family Purity on May 17th. This date is also, notably, the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia. In 2013, an anti-homophobia rally held in Tbilisi was attacked by a group of protesters and radical clergy members, prompting the Patriarch to establish the May 17th as an official Church holiday honoring traditional families in the following year (JAMNews Tbilisi 2018).

³¹ The Patriarch repeated very similar statements in his April 26th and May 6th sermons, thanking the government and comparing the ability to worship freely in Georgia favorably to the more extensive lockdowns in other countries (Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church 2020i; 2020h).

importance of confession and communion, the focal point of external and internal critiques of the GOC at the time. He compares communion to manna from heaven, a miraculous food from the Book of Exodus which is believed to have sustained the Israelites during their 40 years of wandering in the desert,³² in a rhetorical extension of the argument made throughout this period that communion is, for believers, life-sustaining and necessary (*Interpress News Georgia* 2020a).

Although the Patriarch continued to give sermons, much of the task of communicating the specific positions of the office towards limitations on gathering and sanitary standards fell to Archbishop Andria and the press team. On February 28th, the Patriarchate published a written statement on their website in response to claims that the Romanian Orthodox Church was modifying the ritual of communion. In this document, they outlined the “millennial history” of the practice of using a shared spoon and claimed that, in the past, believers did not abstain from communion during periods of epidemic illness (Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church 2020a). Archbishop Andria reaffirmed this position in other interviews, consistently holding that there was no danger associated with the use of shared spoons for communion because of the ritual purity of the eucharist (*On.Ge News* 2020a).

In a somewhat sharp tonal contrast to the gratitude expressed by the Patriarch in sermons, the office of the Patriarchate aired its frustration with both the attention they were receiving and how their messages were covered in the media on several occasions. On March 19th, the Patriarchate’s press service released a statement requesting that members of the media and clergy refrain from sharing their personal opinions on issues related to the coronavirus until the cessation of the March 20th meeting of the Holy Synod (Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church 2020b). By March 28th, after the announcement of the decisions of the Holy Synod, the Patriarchate released another statement criticizing media coverage of the Church, presumably in response to an open letter from various NGOs which requested that the Church consider its social responsibility:

“Some media outlets portray the situation in a way that creates a feeling that they are *artificially preparing the public to blame the Church* for possible problems in the future, despite the fact that the Church is trying to protect the State, including the [implementation of] safety measures established by the National Center for Disease Control” (Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church 2020d) (emphasis mine)

32 Manna has not been mentioned in any of the other Easter Epistles of the past decade but is nonetheless an understandable inclusion. It is common for Christians to interpret the story of Exodus as a kind of Old Testament reflection of Jesus’ life, and explicit comparisons between the resurrection, which is celebrated at Easter, and the salvation of the Israelites are found throughout the New Testament. John 6:30-36, in which Jesus discusses this comparison between the manna and himself, is a clear example of this tendency.

In this same statement, they write that some in both the clergy and the general public were hindered in their faith by “*propaganda* going on in the world today and in our country,” and stated that “forbidding [the public] from attending Church services is unjust and a crime against God” (Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church 2020d). In interviews in the following days, Jaghmaidze tied this treatment to what he understands as a broader pattern of behavior from parts of Georgian society and the media who, in his view, oppose the Church whenever possible:

“Our people can clearly see that, for several years, any available means have been used against the Church. Be it cyanide,³³ be it the virus, or something else. We are accustomed to attempts to use everything to discredit the Church” (*On.Ge News* 2020c)

Jaghmaidze also referenced a kind of “spiritual virus” or “spiritual corona” infecting the public, in particular when referring to the tendency to rebuke or criticize others (*Tabula* 2020d). These statements combined reveal that the highest echelons of the Church felt that they were the target of a campaign of persecution during this period, which, in their view, was even finding supporters within their own ranks.

5.1.C From the Clergy:

The opinions of the clergy varied greatly but can be roughly categorized into three main groups: those who generally supported the Synod’s decisions and deferred to the announcements of the Patriarchate when asked about their views; a group who spoke out in favor of more significant restrictions than what the Synod put in place; and a small but vocal minority who adopted opinions in line with conspiracy theories which proliferated at this time, such as the vaccine microchip theory. These groups correspond to traditionalist, liberal, and fundamentalist positions, respectively (Stoeckl 2016). Quotes representing the personal views of some members of the Synod and other influential clergy members have been selected for inclusion in this section.

5.1.C.a. Traditionalist Positions

³³ This is a reference to the February 2017 arrest of Archdeacon Giorgi Mamaladze, who was accused of plotting to poison a high-ranking member of the Church using cyanide. The target of the plot was presumed to be Patriarch Ilia II, but it was later revealed that the alleged target was actually the Patriarch’s secretary, Shorena Tetrushvili. Mamaladze was sentenced to nine years in prison. External observers have noted several inconsistencies in the government’s case against the priest. Mamaladze, who was the deputy head of the Patriarchate’s department of asset management, had allegedly written a letter to the Patriarch pointing out various financial irregularities in the management of several businesses owned by the Church (JAMNews Tbilisi 2017). This case is notable because it precipitated a significant rupture among the clergy, marked by acrimonious public quarreling in a manner that was previously uncommon (Kadagidze 2019).

The majority of public comments from clergy members were supportive of the positions of the Patriarchate and the Holy Synod. Priests demonstrated their support through various rhetorical appeals to authority, including references to the past and, in particular, the Church's historical experiences with epidemic illness; to the Synod's independent decision-making authority (Unanians 2020a); and the importance of time-honored liturgical tradition and faith in times of crisis. Metropolitan Andrea Gvazava, for example, drafted a statement reminding the population to stay calm and follow the advice of doctors, relaying that the Garejeli fathers left their isolated monastery to serve the nation during the spread of the bubonic plague in Georgia (*Tabula* 2020a).³⁴ In this case, the historical account of the country's past experiences with epidemic illness was used to argue that the Church is composed of socially responsible actors working for the benefit of the population, a tone which they continually strived for despite contradicting the recommendations of public health officials.

Although the exact rules were in flux and being continually negotiated over the first several weeks of the state of emergency, many clergy members made a conscious effort to demonstrate compliance with whichever regulations the Church had deemed necessary. In their view, implementing these measures did not indicate a lack of belief in the purity of communion but was done to assuage the fears of outsiders. In this way, the clergy endeavored to demonstrate that they were upholding their side of the compromise with the State. Metropolitan Davit Makharadze summarized the crux of this approach in an April 2020 sermon:

“Some say that by sharing [in communion], you may be putting others in harm's way. Do not believe it. That standing together, side by side, can be contagious and harmful to others. Do not believe it. It is impossible for anything bad to happen during the service [...] We have no reason for anxiety and do not want to quarrel. Everything in moderation. There is no shame in staying at home. We will come and share [the communion] but we will follow all the other rules so that others are not troubled” (*Tabula* 2020i)

As Easter approached, priests and parishes performed a kind of agreeable dissent towards government regulations not only in interviews and sermons but also in visual media. Technically speaking, gatherings of over 10, and later, over 3, were still banned and carried significant fines. However, rather than hiding their behavior, many Church officials opted for greater transparency. They began posting pictures and videos on Facebook of liturgies. They featured assistants and attendees wearing masks, parishioners studiously maintaining distance from one another, and services conducted at outdoor altars. These videos were, in some cases, shot

³⁴ The Garejeli fathers referred to in this letter are monks from the Davit Gareja monastic complex, which was founded in the 6th century CE.

professionally to specifically emphasize the orderly manner in which the liturgy was being carried out. The Patriarchate was also clearly hoping to avoid the appearance of taking advantage of the conditions of the compromise: when Archpriest Shalva Kekelia, who conducts services at a large church in the Vake district of Tbilisi, told the press that he was preparing a space to hold the Easter liturgy that would allow for up to 2000 attendees while maintaining social distance, Andria Jaghmaidze publicly warned him against doing so, and the mass gathering did not continue as planned (*NetGazeti* 2020a; *OC Media* 2020a).

Figure A: Still from a video of Easter Services posted on the official Facebook page of the Zugdidi-Tsaishi Eparchy. <https://www.facebook.com/102601471334194/videos/542522000017670>

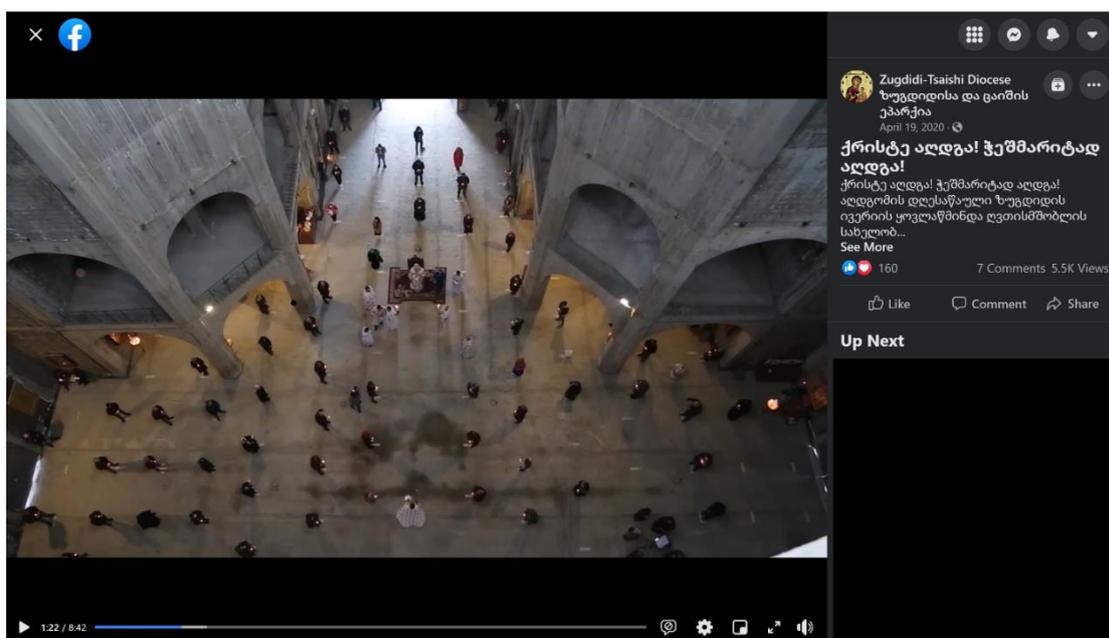
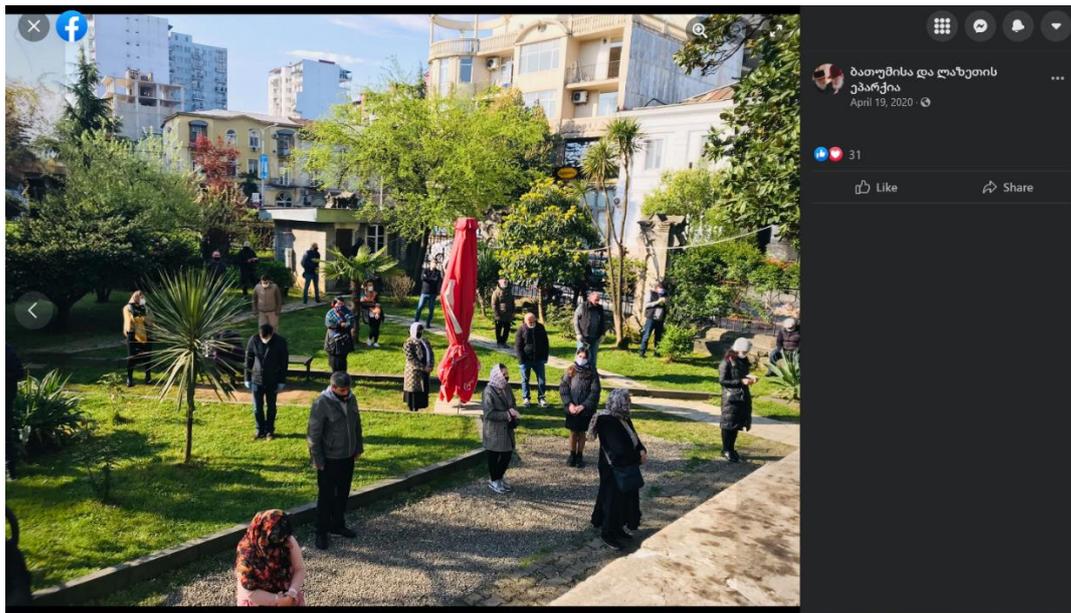


Figure B: Photo of a churchyard in the early evening on the day before Easter, posted on the official Facebook page of the Batumi and Lazeti Eparchy.

<https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=2250262535268537&set=pcb.2250262588601865>



5.1.C.b. Critical Views from Clergy Members

A small number of clergy members were critical of both the Holy Synod's decisions and the government's reluctance to challenge or limit services. Although he did not openly challenge the theological underpinnings of the Synod's decisions, Metropolitan Grigol Berbichashvili of Poti was the most cautious bishop in the Church in the management of his own eparchy. He elected to hold Easter services without parishioners, citing the need to maintain social distance (Unaniants 2020d). He also stated that he could not call on believers to break the law unless the law in question was indeed a "purposeful rebellion before God" (*Tabula* 2020j). The logic underpinning this view runs counter to both the tone and contents of what many other members of the GOC expressed: Metropolitan Grigol held that the State's efforts to limit Church attendance were not excessive or punitive towards religion, but fully warranted and that it was the Church's responsibility to the nation to be as compliant as possible. These sentiments were visible in the critiques from other lower-ranking clergy members as well, such as Deacon Alexandre Galdava, the head priest of the St. Michael the Archangel Church in Tbilisi (*Tabula* 2020l), Metropolitan Saba Intskirveli, the bishop of the Eparchy of North America and Canada (*Novosti - Gruzija* 2020a), and Archpriest Tamaz Lomidze, in Germany. Archpriest Ilia Chighladze, who works in the United Kingdom, attributed the intransigence of many Church officials to inadequate theological training and argued that "fanaticism and fundamentalism" have increased significantly in the GOC since independence (*Tabula* 2020h).

Groups of critical clergy members drafted two open letters during this period. The first, published on March 25th in response to a Statement of the Patriarchate, argued that the Church was reading the rules on communion in an overly simplistic manner and that the shared spoon was one of several theologically acceptable modes of giving the host to believers. These priests and theologians argued that this position also threatened to insult other Orthodox Churches:

“If restricting attendance at church services is ‘unjustified and a crime against God,’ as stated [in the statement of the Patriarchate], this means that the vast majority of the Orthodox Church in the world is committing unjust crimes, which is a serious charge against the body of the Orthodox Church” (*Radio Tavisupleba* 2020)

In an April 17th statement, many of the same clergy members announced that they would temporarily stop from taking an active part in religious life for Easter because “whoever refrains from worshiping today due to the epidemic is not betraying Christ, but instead tries to perform a spiritual liturgy in the service of [their] fellow neighbor in the given situation” (*NetGazeti* 2020b). Several theologians and clergy members also wrote statements justifying staying at home and avoiding services for the EMC (now called the “Social Justice Center”), a left-wing Tbilisi-based NGO (EMC 2020a). In all of these statements, the signatory clergy members and theologians argued for the position that not participating in church life out of fear of the virus or desire to protect others was not a sign of deficient faith but rather a demonstration of Christian love for one’s neighbor and community. Interestingly, the majority of these clergy members were located outside of Georgia and are either serving the Church or studying in the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Greece, and elsewhere. Many of them were also relatively young and had received theological training abroad.

5.1.C.c. Conspiracy Theories:

A vocal minority of priests and bishops used the pulpit to share their own versions of conspiracy theories which proliferated globally during this period. The four major theories that gained traction among members of the Church were the ideas that the virus was purposely developed for satanic ends; that vaccines (which were, at the time, still undeveloped) were dangerous and would kill people; that vaccines would lead to mass microchipping of the population; and that anti-Church actors were behind the state of emergency and had potentially even fabricated the illness entirely (or severely overstated its danger) to engender compliance in the population (Ratiani 2020). The common feature of these conspiratorial frameworks is a belief in global forces fighting directly against the Church or in which the Church is the sole actor that recognizes the threats posed by these forces, an ontology that allows clergy members to present

themselves as defenders of the faith. Metropolitan Iob of the Ruisi-Urbnisi Eparchy, for example, was quoted in a newspaper claiming that emergency funding that Georgia was to receive from the IMF and the EU to assist with the government's response to the coronavirus was, in reality, distributed with the explicit aim of fighting against the Church (Unaniants 2020e; JAMNews Tbilisi 2020g). Metropolitan Ioseb (Kikvadze) claimed during a sermon that the virus was “obviously man-made” and that it was spread to facilitate the development of digital currencies, which would lead to hacking (*Tabula* 2020f).³⁵ In the same sermon, he stated that the fact that Orthodox community leaders were under pressure to close churches, as other denominations had, was evidence that “in two to three years, humanity will cease to exist” (*Tabula* 2020e). Both Archpriest Saba Chikaidze and Archpriest Davit Isakadze claimed that vaccines were being developed and promoted to reduce the global population to only one billion people (*Tabula* 2020m; Ratiani 2020).³⁶ The anti-Church forces accused of acting in the shadows include freemasons, Bill Gates, the European Union, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank (Ratiani 2020).

5.2 Analysis

Amidst this selection of views, several themes emerge that may be considered the positions of the Church. First, the Church defends its decision to keep services open to the public and to continue using the single communion spoon primarily through religious liberty arguments. This

³⁵ Both millenarian and some more mainstream actors in the Orthodox Churches of Georgia, Greece, and Russia have protested against various forms of digitization in the past, such as the introduction of individual identification numbers, national identity cards containing chips, credit cards, and digital currencies (Lomsadze 2013; Kishkovsky 2011). Suslov referred to this tendency in the context of the ROC as “digital anxiety” and attributed its emergence to the Church's anxiety that they cannot control what is consumed on the internet (Suslov 2016). The clearest present expression of this anxiety is the adoption of the widespread microchip conspiracy theory relating to the Coronavirus vaccine. The Patriarch of the Orthodox Church of Moldova, for example, even shared the microchip theory from the pulpit in the Spring of 2020 (Necsutu 2020b), as did some of the fathers at Mount Athos in Greece. Anxieties surrounding digitization and, in particular, state-led digitization appear to be motivated by the belief that centralized systems of managing personal data may simplify forms of discrimination against Christians, one of the early warning signs of the coming of the Antichrist and apocalypse (Knorre and Murashova 2021). These views are not new and are presumed to have spread through networks of Old Calendarists and Greek Orthodox into the Soviet Union as early as the 1980s and 90s (Pachenko 2017).

³⁶ In this project, I elect to view conspiracy theories from hierarchs as genuine expressions of their opinions and beliefs. Many of the individuals who espoused these views are also included in a list of Church members who are known to have shared explicitly pro-Russian views in the past (Buziashvili et al. 2021, 13–16). The fact that some clergy members who are more aligned with pro-Russian political views are also more susceptible to conspiracy theories is not surprising and does not necessarily need to be understood as a sign of purposeful disinformation. The ROC has historically had a particularly strong strain of fundamentalist and eschatologically-oriented thought over the past 120 years, in particular (Hagemeister 2018). These eschatological views in the post-Soviet era are associated primarily with the writings of certain cult figures, like Seraphim Rose, Archimandrite Rafail **Karelin**, and Sergei Nilus (Interviewee 4 2020).

can be explained by a union that was brokered between the traditionalist and fundamentalist poles of the Church. Finally, the Church expressed frustration and a sense of being embattled, arguing that journalists were waging a campaign against them.

5.2.A. Religious Liberties

A common thread that is visible in the vast majority of communications from the Church and its representatives over this period is the central importance that they place on *religious liberty*. However, the notion of religious liberty espoused by the Patriarchate and the majority of the clergy members may be understood as functioning at two levels. The first dimension is a conception of religious freedom rooted in the individual right to experience the divine, which, in this case, fundamentally privileged the rights of the individual Orthodox churchgoer over the remainder of the population. The second, which is more relevant to the upper echelons of the Church, was a statement of religious freedom for the Church as an institution – a request for space and time to maneuver and weigh options in a context that otherwise required rapid action and clear messaging. The debates over the communion spoon and the freedom to gather may be understood as expressions of the Church’s positions brought to light these two dimensions of religious freedom as understood by the Orthodox Church.

The eucharist, in combination with other sacraments, is the cornerstone of the Orthodox Christian faith. Stopping or limiting access to gatherings posed challenges that were not unique to the Orthodox Church in Georgia, and these challenges were widely discussed in Orthodox and, indeed, all other religious communities around the globe. One idea that was repeated frequently by Church representatives throughout this period was the notion that, for believers, “spiritual nourishment is as important as carnal food.” The Patriarch repeatedly made statements to this effect (Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church 2020f), as did his spokesperson Andria Jaghmaidze, several hierarchs (*Tabula* 2020k), and even one of the theologians whom I interviewed, Levan Abashidze (Abashidze 2020). To frame this in terms that became widely used during coronavirus era: in the view of the Church, communion is an essential service for believers.

Following this thread literally, the State limiting access to the sacraments, even in minor ways, was therefore as unacceptable to much of the Church hierarchy as categorically preventing the population from going to supermarkets or pharmacies would be. The Church mediates the relationship of the believer to the divine, and it was not, in the view of the Patriarchate, the place of the State to determine the most intimate aspects of this mediation process. More conservative

hierarchs expressed that the prospects of closing churches or holding holiday services without believers were “unimaginable” to them. One of the more telling rhetorical strategies used during this period was comparisons of those requesting that Churches be closed to the anti-religious agitators of the Soviet era or early anti-Christian persecution:

“Closing the church was something unprecedented, yes? Only the Bolsheviks have done that, and that was in the early days of the Bolsheviks. To close churches on Sunday... it’s something, you know, persecution like in the early days of Christianity, to tell a community that they cannot come together and pray. If you know Christian history, well, you know that it would be something ridiculous.” (Abashidze 2020)

Here, Abashidze evokes two of the most acutely traumatic experiences in Church history and compares the prospect of Churches temporarily closing for public health reasons to them, clearly indicating that some Church figures feel embattled. The comparison to the Soviet Union may seem at first to be hyperbolic, but sanitary standards were utilized in a somewhat punitive manner by anti-religious agitators in the USSR. Mitrofanova relayed how some “Corona-dissidents”³⁷ in the ROC openly compared the experience of being surveilled during COVID to anti-religious campaigns in the Soviet era as well. Some priests actually shared how sanitary checks and measures were used in a punitive manner by *militia*, who could force priests to close Churches and wash icons with cologne and other cleaning substances at will (Mitrofanova 2021). The sanitary issue is also connected to communion. Soviet promotion of the idea that Orthodox communion, in particular, was uniquely unsanitary and worthy of disgust has some striking parallels to the Protestant demonization of the Catholic belief in the actual presence of Christ in the Eucharist. While it is outside of the scope of this project to determine the extent to which sanitary checks were utilized in anti-religious campaigns in the Georgian SSR, Church officials are responding defensively to the discursive redrawing of their rituals as unsanitary and, therefore, uncivilized (Goshadze 2020).

Archbishop Nikoloz Pachuashvili went so far as to state that “We cannot ban believers from coming to services. Even if we said such a thing, *true believers* would never accept it” (Unaniants 2020a) (emphasis mine). This phrasing, which implies that not attending church services was a sign of inadequate or false belief, was not condoned or promoted by the Patriarch or the Synod. As was discussed above, they repeated that those who were uncomfortable should stay at home. However, the Patriarchate did not *forbid* bishops from expressing these types of views publicly, which placed believers in the uncomfortable position of measuring their own

³⁷ In the Russian context, corona-dissidents are those who disagreed with or objected to Patriarch Kirill’s theological justification of stay-at-home orders.

faith against their desire to follow the law and to heed the advice of public health authorities. As Tamara Grdzelidze stated in our interview, “the whole responsibility was put onto the people” (Grdzelidze 2020). Government figures and Church officials presented this compromise as being motivated by an optimistic view of the personal and social responsibility of the population of Georgia. However, the numerous pleas of public health officials and orchestrated personal visits to the Patriarchate from various members of the government indicate that that the compromise was deeply contentious. This is likely why many Church officials endeavored to perform compliance even as they technically broke the law.

The second form of religious liberty promoted by the Church, in this case, is a kind of institutional-level room for maneuver. This could be understood as deriving from individual religious liberties. The Patriarchate insisted on the right to a monopoly over the mediation of the relationship between the believer and the divine and refused to modify the rituals of this mediation despite significant external pressures, in the view of some, specifically as a means of asserting this right. The structure of the Church is relevant to this discussion. In Eastern Orthodoxy, there are two separate but interrelated principles of *akribeia* and *oikonomia*. The former refers to exactitude and strictness in observance of the laws of the Church, while the latter is the exercise of flexibility and leniency (Grdzelidze 2004). One of the main roles of bishops and the Holy Synod in the life and pastoral care of the Church is to tighten or loosen the laws at various times and to determine the appropriate balance of these principles through careful deliberation (Gurchiani 2017b; Schembri 2015, 127–29; Orsy 1982). Adapting the communion ritual, as was done in most Eastern Orthodox churches around the world, would be an expression of *oikonomia* – a liberalization or modification undertaken in the interests of saving the Church.

This was not the conclusion that the Synod came to, however, in their deliberations, and the reason why this occurred in the Georgian case, unlike in most other Orthodox churches, is related to the ideological composition of the Holy Synod and the views of its constituent members. In Levan Abashidze’s view, the Church endeavors to maintain a wide ideological tent:

“In our church, one priest can tell you that something should be done this way, another priest can tell you another way. You can say it is freer, or you could say that it is more chaotic. But there are no strict orders... That’s important to understand, that our Church is, in a way, quite liberal. There are many priests who are critical towards the Patriarchate and there are no administrative consequences” (Abashidze 2020)

This “liberalism” has been challenged and tested several times within the past thirty years, and in the past five, in particular, by a spate of accusations of personal impropriety leveled amongst the

clergy.³⁸ In several cases, the Synod and Patriarchate have elected to defrock priests who acted in a manner that they deemed unacceptable. In my discussion with Abashidze, however, we were speaking more about disagreements over issues of canonical understanding and the actual practice of Church life rather than the interpersonal dimension of relationships between various clergy members. In this case, there were dominant voices among the upper hierarchs who were reluctant to change liturgical practice at all and who expressed offense at the notion of outsiders questioning the Church's authority on these issues. As early as March 3rd, Metropolitan Antoni of Van and Bagdati said in a televised interview: "The Church is treated like this: there is a shepherd and there are sheep. Now, the sheep are teaching the shepherd what to do, where to graze, which pastures to go to [...] We [the clergy] will regulate the relationship between the Church and the believers" (*Tabula* 2020c). Perhaps the best articulation of the positions of the Synod is that they did not enforce decisions. They did not order that all churches must stay open, nor did they categorically prevent individual priests from abstaining from distributing the eucharist or modifying its mode of distribution their own parishes. They also did not, however, provide a theologically approved or recommended means of modifying the communion. In practice, each bishop and priest did as he saw fit, within some boundaries. That is, the Church was arguing both for the right of the flock to follow the shepherd but also for the right of each shepherd to lead his flock without external regulation.

5.2.B Traditionalists Making Space for Fundamentalism

Although the notion of an institution desiring autonomy over areas that it considers to be its domain is understandable, one question that follows from this discussion is: why was the Church unwilling or unable to form a coherent position on these issues? One potential answer is polarization within the Synod. In the Georgian Orthodox Church, the specific pressures of the coronavirus revealed that hierarchs *who hold views that may be described as fundamentalist occupy several seats in the Synod. The Patriarchate, representing a traditionalist, but not fundamentalist, viewpoint, wanted to avoid alienating the fundamentalists.*

In his analysis of fundamentalism in Orthodoxy, theologian Cyril Hovorun argues that, while the underlying principles of fundamentalism are similar across religious communities, the ways in which it is expressed differ across faiths and time. In the Orthodox context, he identifies the "cult of spiritual authorities," the unquestioning veneration of Church Fathers, and ritualism

³⁸ Liberalism is placed in quotation marks in this case because Abashidze was not referring to liberalism as a political philosophy but more as an abstract notion of freedom of thought and action within the institution.

as the primary expressions of contemporary fundamentalism (Hovorun 2020). The first refers to gerontocratic tendencies in churches, which may be abused by Church elders. Excessive veneration of Church Fathers occurs when clergy treat these figures³⁹ as absolute authorities without adequate understanding of their historical contexts. Meanwhile, ritualism takes the form of extreme focus on details of liturgical practice, to the extent that any modification is decried as heresy and, potentially, grounds for schism. In Hovorun's understanding, these fundamentalist challenges mounted from within are typically a response to external social pressures and a sense of insecurity. In his analyses of the responses of the Orthodox Church in the Russian and Ukrainian contexts to the pandemic, Hovorun identifies what he describes as "corona fundamentalism." In Georgia, "corona fundamentalism" is marked by extreme ritualism. Despite there being no canonical basis for the insistence on the use of a shared communion spoon, a fact which was discussed by both the more liberal and pro-Patriarchate theologians whom I spoke with (Grdzeldze 2020; Abashidze 2020), there was a sense that modifying the ritual was unacceptable because it is a part of the traditional liturgical culture. In essence, the crux of the Church's argument against distributing the host in a manner that would be safer from an epidemiological perspective was an appeal to "millennial tradition" (Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church 2020a).

One religious studies scholar whom I interviewed argued that the Patriarchate and Synod actually utilized this fundamentalist ritualism to justify their intransigence and lack of willingness to consider changes to the communion ritual or the rights to gather:

"Fundamentalist thought became very vivid during the time of Corona. What I mean is that these thoughts were popular among priests before, but, you know, we never heard it from officials and high-level bishops. They were more marginal. But in the corona times, they used such teachings to legitimize their views that we should never close churches, because this would mean that the Antichrist will come, which is a sign of the end times. This Orthodox tradition was based on very controversial teachings [...] not on normative teachings." (Interviewee 4 2020)

The argument that the Church may be using the doctrines of fundamentalist thinkers to obfuscate or avoid accountability for unpopular positions was not universally accepted, however. Abashidze pinpoints this reluctance as being rooted in response to the public and, in particular,

³⁹ Church Fathers are influential theologians, particularly from the early era of Christianity. Catholics believe that the patristic period ended after John of Damascus (675-749 CE), while for the Orthodox, it continues to this day. Much of the intellectual work of theology is about consulting and comparing the writings of these venerated theologians to find areas of consensus between them, which become the dogmas of the Church.

the threat of schism. He recounted past issues with changing church calendars or modifying the fasts even slightly, stating:

“People are very conscious. People who don’t even understand the calendar are very aware when you try to change something. It’s the same with the single spoon. For me – I am an Orthodox Christian. I am a theologian. I understand that if you have, instead of a single spoon, each brings their own, or something else, that there is no canonical problem. But it is very difficult to explain to everybody. Of course, there will be some reforms which are necessary, which are timely, but it is very difficult, because every time, there are some segments of the Church which are going schismatic, too. For instance, there are seven or eight small schismatic Orthodox churches which broke away because of some small issues, and very often these issues are so ridiculous.” (Abashidze 2020)

In this context, the Synod’s partial embrace of fundamentalist ideas may be understood as an effort to maintain the unity of the Church in an increasingly polarized environment. The threat of schism would, most likely, be particularly salient to a Church facing the prospect of losing two major canonical territories (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) and which has seen the formation of a number of small schismatic churches by former clergy members (Crego 2014, 147).

The intransigent public, on whose behalf the Church claimed to be acting, is also visible in statements like Pachuashvili’s about “true believers.” This is undergirded by a veiled threat towards the government that interrupting services could have prompted even more dissenting behavior, such as protests in response to the perceived persecution of faithful Christians.

Theologian Levan Abashidze expressed a similar sentiment:

“I don’t think that it would have been better, or much better, if the government had a more strict policy, say, ‘now we are doing a lockdown and everybody should obey’, and so forth. I don’t think that it would be better because, in that case, there would be much more conflict. Many, many people, not only churchgoers but, I think, the wider public, would be unhappy with that. And this would include some radicalized groups.” (Abashidze 2020)

What both of these statements allude to is the existence of groups of radicalized individuals who claim to support the Church. Many of these groups have personal relationships with charismatic fundamentalist clergy members, which is clear because they have been called on in the past to protest, notably at public events concerning the LGBT community. The threat of deploying violent groups that are not technically accountable to the Church in the case that they fail to achieve desired goals at the institutional level is a form of hybrid negotiation or engagement on the part of the hierarchy.

5.2.C Anti-Church “Propaganda”

Finally, it is worth discussing which groups of society the Church highlights as the source of their perceived persecution and where they understand the locus of the conflict to be. The contours of a post-secular conflict are visible in the criticisms of the church, in that the threat seems to emanate not from a single institution, but rather an amalgamation of ideas espoused by individuals in the media, civil society organizations, the government, and even in the more progressive wing of the Church itself. The first level that should be discussed in this case is that of the Patriarchate. In Statements of the Patriarchate and interviews with Andria Jaghmaidze, the “media” is blamed for waging what they interpret as a campaign targeted against them. This appears to be rooted in frustrations with outsiders discussing what the Church wants to present as internal issues or questions. The religious studies scholar whom I spoke with argued that online media in Georgia has, indeed, become something of a secularizing force in the country:

“Media, and especially online media, has made a huge contribution to deconstructing the taboos around religious topics. Online media [outlets] that write about religion and church-related topics are not popular, but they have contributed to critical thinking. I would say that I believe the media also has some influence on the secularization process. I think that if we want to start research on secularization, we should look at the media, because many people express their secular views there. The internet is a freer space. Church-State relations were known about by scholars and experts, but among the wider public, it was not discussed. Even this controversial financial support [...] People didn’t know about it.” (Interviewee 4 2020)

They also noted, however, that while the media has contributed to the normalization of secular viewpoints, more open discussions of Church-State relations, and also to the criticism of the wealth that the Church has amassed from its relationship with the State, there is also a tendency to turn stories about the Church into a “show” (Interview 01). This tendency was clearly visible in the coverage of this case. The more fundamentalist wing of the Church, which did receive disproportionate coverage from media outlets, openly claimed that international money was being directed to Georgia to fund anti-Church propaganda. While the Patriarchate did not make such statements, their positions were, again, not contradictory to this view, and they dismissively claim that critical priests are victims of external “propaganda.”

6. The Liberal Critique from Theologians

6.1 “Secular Moderns” and Habermas’ Liberal Religion

In an opinion blog for the Religious Studies department of Utrecht University, Mariam Goshadze argues that the locus of the conflict over the communion spoon was rooted in the differing ontologies of two groups in Georgian society – the Orthodox Church and their supporters, and a group that she refers to as both “liberals” and “secular moderns.” In her analysis, the “secular modern” segment of society problematized the use of the communion spoon in a way that charted the Church and its believers as “uncivilized.” As tensions rose, the “secular moderns” framed the corporeal and embodied aspects of worship as unsanitary, barbaric, and, in the context of the pandemic where germs can kill, immoral (Goshadze 2020). Interestingly Goshadze’s “secular moderns” encompass, as was discussed in the previous chapter, many clergy members and representatives of the community of theologians who played an essential role in this case. The liberal *religious* response is the focus of this chapter.

The critical side of this discussion is populated by a broad coalition – from political opposition members and academics to theologians and reformist clergy members. This cross-section speaks to an ideological cleavage in Georgian society itself. While many claim that Georgian political parties are based on influential or appealing personalities rather than coherent ideological platforms (DRI and GYLA 2018), this does not mean that there are no such cleavages amongst the electorate. Opinions on the appropriate role of the Church in public life appear to be one important litmus test of political values in contemporary Georgia. In his study of 2016 pre-election survey results, Wheatley identifies the clusters of orientations at the extremities of this cleavage:

“At one pole of this dimension are those who want to protect the Georgian economy from foreign ownership, believe that the GOC should play a major role in politics, are intolerant of gay rights, and have a relatively positive view of Russia – and Stalin – and a correspondingly negative view of the West. At the other pole are those who are more liberal in matters of gay rights, are more critical of the GOC, are pro-Western, and generally more tolerant of influences from abroad.”

Wheatley finds that supporters of the former set of values are likelier to be older women who possess a technical education. In contrast, the latter set is likelier to be younger, male, and in possession of an education that equips them better for globalization (Wheatley 2020, 15–17). While the population (or, at least, the media and intelligentsia) is continually debating the role of the Church, the particularly novel element, in this case, was that a core aspect of the Orthodox faith – communion and attendance at the liturgy – became the site of conflict between the

ideological camps. The presentation of a divided front amongst the clergy, whether strategic or not, opened up an opportunity for criticism from within and demonstrated that the Church is not immune to these cleavages.

Both theologians interviewed for this project discussed the need for some reform in Church-State relations, although they differed in where they lay the onus of blame for the conflict-prone present. Abashidze believes that politicians try to curry the Church's favor for their own ends to excess (Abashidze 2020), while Grdzeldze criticized both the lack of awareness of some lawmakers in these matters and the Church's intransigence. It is more accurate to refer to the latter group, represented here by Grdzeldze, as supporters of liberal public religion. This group argues that a reform of the Church is necessary if the institution is to exist productively in contemporary society, in line with Habermas' statement that only after a period of "hermeneutic self-reflection" can religions be public. Issues like LGBT and minority rights, immigration, and the powers that should be extended to the Church are the main public flashpoints in the relationship between the triad of Church, State, and public. Questions over the Church's role as a moral arbiter and political actor can be partially solved, in the view of "secular moderns" by the Church establishing epistemic stances towards other religions, secular society, secular knowledge sources, and a dedication to egalitarianism (Habermas 2006, 14). This camp rejects the acceptability of a traditionalist Church that operates by means of exceptions. These theologians are taking part in a kind of Habermasian critical self-reflection through engagement with the Georgian Christian tradition and what they understand to be constructive criticism of the Church.

6.2. Critical Theologians

Theologians, like priests, were called upon for their opinions frequently by both the media and NGOs during this period. In addition to interview data, this section is based on 40 quotes and written commentaries found in news sources articles written by theologians for the Social Justice Center (formerly called the EMC). These all came from 18 different critical theologians. This chapter highlights this cohort because they argue specifically from *within* the Orthodox tradition in defense of a liberal way of engaging with the world. These positions spring primarily from two sources. The first is based on disagreements with the Church's interpretation of doctrine, which many of these theologians claim lacks contextual understanding or scriptural basis. The second is more externally and geopolitically oriented. They view the Church's traditionalist stance, which triggers further desecularization, as incompatible with what they understand to be European or Western norms. As a group, these are highly educated scholars

who often speak several languages, have pursued education abroad, and occupy a somewhat privileged position in Georgian society. They generally fall into Wheatley's second category and openly support Georgia's integration into the West. They take positions that may be characterized as liberal in the ideological field of Orthodoxy, meaning that they support participating in interfaith dialogues and promoting the unity of the Orthodox Church. Generally, they also support distancing the GOC from the ROC rhetorically and symbolically.⁴⁰

Virtually all of the comments from theologians gathered for this project were somewhat critical of the Synod's decision on the communion ritual. In our interview, Tamara Grdzelidze challenged the compromise:

“The problem with this is that there isn't a proper understanding or interpretation of what is 'tradition'. Tradition is not about using a church item. That's not tradition in its primary sense. Tradition is an uninterrupted teaching that we, the Orthodox, claim that we possess from the times of Jesus Christ through the apostles and until now. This is *the* tradition: an uninterrupted teaching of the Church. items are a separate thing. In all countries, church items have been a matter of local rituals, local traditions. These rituals become a local tradition after being used for years or, in our case, centuries. But that's a different tradition. These ritual-related traditions are completely different from *the* church teaching, *kerygma*, as the Greeks call it. Church items cannot belong to the tradition of Christian teaching. Yes, the chalice and spoon are special items, but it's different. It's not the same as *kerygma*. So, there is a lack of clarity over what the Christian tradition is in reality. The lack of clarity creates this confusion. Had the Church acknowledged that under the secular age, with a strong sense of separated spheres, we should not be confusing *kerygma* with local tradition for rituals, there would not have happened confusion over the spoon. The Church must take seriously the current political climate of democracy and constitutional governance and comply with the overall legislation for the sake of its own flock, society in general, the State.” (Grdzelidze 2020)

In the view of this critical school of theologians, there is a connection between the failure to distinguish between different semantic fields of tradition and the failure to accept secular modernity and the neutrality of the Georgian government. Others echoed similar views. Theologian Zurab Jashi criticized the Church's intransigence over the communion by arguing that it threatened to transform faith into “superstition inherent in magical rituals.” Jashi calls *kerygma* – the dogma and ancient tradition of theological thought – the “treasure” of Georgian Orthodoxy and argues that appropriately following this “treasure” would never lead to action that could harm society (Jashi 2020). Shota Kintsurashvili argued that the Synod's decision was not grounded in any “educational, canonical, or dogmatic issue”, but in an obsession with a flat notion of tradition caused by a lack of knowledge and poor theological education. In an argument that echoes Zaal Andronikashvili's thesis (Chapter 4), Kintsurashvili attributes the lack

⁴⁰ An issue that typifies this stance is the debate over recognizing the Autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. Liberal priests like Irakli Jinjolava, with around thirty theologians, drafted a letter supporting the new Patriarch of the OCU. They stated that the logic behind doing so was to isolate the ROC from the rest of Orthodoxy and promote unity in the faith (Jinjolava 2019; *Ukerinform* 2019).

of religious literacy in the clergy to the Russian and Soviet “occupations” of Georgia, which interrupted the Church’s lineage (Kintsurashvili 2020). Members of this critical group argue from within Orthodoxy that important elements of tradition are mishandled or not consulted at all by the current Church hierarchy.

Theologians were divided over whether they viewed the Church’s position as a pastoral or a political issue, or both. Politically-oriented critiques of the Church-State agreement tend to come from theologians who regard the Church’s present hierarchy with deep pessimism. Much of their frustration was actually directed towards the State, because they view the expansive orientation of the Church – its desecularizing drive – as a foregone conclusion of its traditionalist stance. Perhaps the most extreme representative of this group is Basil Kobakhidze, the former press secretary of the GOC, who was defrocked in 2005 over disagreements with the Patriarch. In a YouTube video in early April, quoted in *Ekho Kavkaza*, he stated:

“Conducting a dialogue with the Patriarchate and the Patriarch is senseless. You can present arguments from a medical, state, societal, or even theological point of view. They have their own logic, they live in their own world, they have their own God, who is an evil being that needs human sacrifice like, for example, Moloch. It is not Jesus Christ or the Holy Trinity” (Unaniants 2020b).

Giorgi Tiginashvili accused the Church of “sabotag[ing]” the government’s anti-disease efforts for financial gain. “We see that the Church views society as a market [or] bazaar commodity and is trying to, through bargaining with the authorities, receive far more benefits, financial resources, and spheres of influence than it has had before” (*Novosti - Gruzija* 2020b). Several others, including Beka Mindiashvili, Gocha Barnov, and Mirian Gamrekelashvili, argued that negotiation with the Church was impossible and that the situation demanded a more forceful assertion of authority on the part of the State (*Tabula* 2020g; Gamrekelashvili 2020; Unaniants 2020c).

Although this brief analysis has not done justice to the diversity of views from critical theologians, this chapter endeavors to roughly sketch the contours of their views on the GOC as reflected in the present case. Much like the analysis of the GOC itself from Chapter 5, this section may be overly elite or intelligentsia-oriented, but it, nonetheless, accentuates the dynamic and dialogic nature of (de-)secularization.

7. Discussion of Results and Conclusions

In this dissertation, I have argued that COVID-19 showed the Georgian Orthodox Church to be a traditionalist institution due to their tendencies to privilege Orthodoxy over other religions, to challenge the validity of secular knowledge, and to articulate the exercise of religion in terms of human rights, even during a state of emergency. I have also investigated the reasons behind these stances and argue that it is due primarily to internal divisions within the Church and an agreement between the traditionalist center and fundamentalist wing of the Synod, which was emboldened in this episode. Secondly, this thesis discussed how critical theologians and clergy members answered the Church's political statements and rhetorical techniques. These individuals represent a liberal, or reformist, response to the Easter Agreement from within the Orthodox tradition.

7.1 Impact on the General Public

After analyzing the anatomy of this debate, it is natural to question how this episode affected the general public. In terms of health, the feared "Church cluster" did not materialize after Easter gatherings. The Ministry of Health in Georgia attributed this success to its intensified restrictions over the holiday weekend, which severely curbed attendance at services ("Measures Implemented by the Government of Georgia against Coronavirus" 2020). The Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) published a wealth of data on church attendance and attitudes towards the Church-State agreement based on surveys carried out from April through June 2020. A survey from the week after Easter found that only 4% of respondents reported attending services, while 41% had in the year before (CRRC 2020a). The same question asked in an NDI study in June showed that 10% of the respondents had attended services (CRRC 2020g). Interestingly, respondents of both Armenian Apostolic and Catholic faith also reported going to Church for Easter in 2020 in this survey despite official announcements from the leadership of both communities that services would be suspended nationwide (Appendix II). This data underscores how official positions, while significant, do not necessarily reflect the complex realities on the ground.

Low attendance numbers and the lack of outbreaks following Easter do not mean that this episode had no impact on the population. A wealth of medical literature has demonstrated that active participation in religious communities, rather than belief itself, is generally correlated with positive public health outcomes (Milstein, Palitsky, and Cuevas 2020). Studies also show that, in faith communities, religious leaders can play a crucial role in promoting healthy choices among believers (Harmon et al. 2016). While the potential damage of religious leaders openly

sharing false information about the virus is difficult to measure and falls outside of the purview of this project, one can assume that believers do not simply ignore their otherwise trusted religious authorities when they speak about health from the pulpit. Indeed, NDI survey data found that a plurality of Georgian believers of *all faiths* report trusting information that their religious leader shares with them about the coronavirus (Appendix II). In their pursuit to justify potentially high-risk faith-based behaviors, religious leaders of a more traditionalist or fundamentalist bent are likely to question or refute scientific knowledge. They support these challenges with pseudoscientific claims that the mainstream medical community has rejected. This behavior undermines the authority of public health officials and has deleterious effects on their messaging campaigns (Zalcborg and Zalcborg-Block 2021).

The majority of Church hierarchs did not express fundamentalist viewpoints, and public health authorities in Georgia took great pains to avoid singling out or alienating Orthodox believers. However, it is still reasonable to assume that receiving these mixed messages from trusted sources may have caused some individuals to take the threat of the virus less seriously or engage in riskier behaviors. This effect may also extend to vaccine hesitancy in Georgia, as the Church has not prevented its hierarchs from spreading misinformation about vaccines (Ratiani 2020).

Interestingly, CRRC and NDI studies show that most of the population agreed with the policies imposed by public health authorities throughout this period, with approval ratings for masking indoors, evening curfews, closing cemeteries, and driving bans ranging from 75-95% (CRRC 2020a). This tracks fairly logically with previous findings that most Georgians tend to self-identify as Orthodox when asked, and place great symbolic importance in the Church, even if their rates of attendance and participation in Church life are comparably low (Charles 2009). In waves of surveys carried out between April and June, over half of the population reported believing that the Orthodox Church managed COVID well.⁴¹ However, the decision to continue using the Communion spoon was a more divisive point: 30% of the respondents agreed that it should be used, 43% disagreed, and 23% did not know how they felt. Of these respondents, those who did not claim any religion were the most critical (88% disagreeing), followed by

41 The waves of the CRRC surveys about the Coronavirus asked respondents to rate the “performance” of the Orthodox Church in response to the coronavirus on a periodic basis between late April (the week after Easter) and mid-June (following the end of the State of Emergency). In every dataset, between 64 and 75% of respondents consistently agreed that the Church performed either “well” or “very well.” The percentage of the public who negatively assessed the Church’s performance ranged between 14 and 6%. Overall, the assessment became progressively more positive the further the Easter conflict was in the rearview (CRRC 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; 2020d; 2020e; 2020f).

members of the Armenian Apostolic Church (67%) and then Georgian Orthodox believers (43%). (CRRC 2020a). Therefore, one can surmise that the most significant division was over the Church's defense of the Communion spoon.

7.2 The International Dimension

Another element of this case that drew significant interest from scholars of Orthodoxy was how the broader community varied in their management of these challenges. Following the 2018 Schism between the ROC and the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople over the status of the Church in Ukraine, the Orthodox world has been in disarray. The GOC is an interesting case to analyze within the broader community because it tends to take a more isolationist position in global Orthodoxy, abstaining from participation in most international dialogues and refusing to either recognize or disassociate with the newly-constituted Orthodox Church of Ukraine.⁴² It became clear official policies varied widely based on the specific tenor of Church-State relations in the country, the ideological bent of each Church's hierarchy, and the severity of the epidemiological restrictions in place. In Greece, for example, the government surprised many by taking a zero-tolerance policy towards holding services, even banning small groups of priests from performing the liturgy without the flock. For most Church leaders, compliance was the norm: both the Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople and Patriarch Kirill of the ROC held Easter services with no attendees and requested that believers stay at home.⁴³ The church that most closely mirrors the GOC is the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, which kept services open and also saw severe limitations on attendance at services due to practical barriers established by the government.⁴⁴ Globally speaking, the GOC was unique in their lack of an official policy towards the Communion spoon, as most other Patriarchates established a set of protocols, even if they were not always closely adhered to in practice.

⁴² This silence is likely caused by fears that if the GOC were to recognize the OCU, the ROC would retaliate by officially supporting the independence of the breakaway Orthodox Church in Abkhazia/Abkhazeti, thus shrinking the GOC's canonical boundaries (Chapidze and Umland 2019).

⁴³ Policies in Russia, which were brokered between local Bishops and regional administrators, varied widely.

⁴⁴ The Bulgarian case also, interestingly, mirrors Georgia's trajectory with the virus more generally – both countries managed to stave off the first severe outbreak until Fall 2020, at which point uncontrolled spread began.

Figure C: Official Policies of Eastern Orthodox Churches towards COVID

Complete ban on services	-Church of Greece (Koutantou 2020)
Services held but attended only by priests	-Serbian Orthodox Church -Romanian Orthodox Church (Kajosevic 2020) -Church of Cyprus (<i>Kathimerini Cyprus</i> 2020) -Orthodox Church of Ukraine ⁴⁵ (Bellamy 2020) -North Macedonia (<i>Jevropejskaja Pravda</i> 2020) -Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (Heintz 2020) -Greek Orthodox Church of Jerusalem -Greek Orthodox Church of Antioch -Greek Orthodox Church of Alexandria -Orthodox Church of the Czech Lands and Slovakia ⁴⁶
Services held outdoors, open to public	-Metropolis of Chisinau and All Moldova (Necsutu 2020a) -Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate (Bellamy 2020)
Varied based on regional requirements	-Russian Orthodox Church (Mitrofanova 2021)
Services held indoors, limited attendance	-Polish Orthodox Church (Sulkowski and Ignatowski 2020)
Services held indoors, open to unrestricted public attendance	-Georgian Orthodox Church -Bulgarian Orthodox Church (Tsolova 2020)

The second noteworthy international development in this case was the fertile soil that COVID provided for the public emergence of fundamentalist thought. Orthodox fundamentalism tends to manifest formally as anti-ecumenism and isolationism. However, the sheer similarity of the conspiracy theories put forward by clergy in completely different linguistic contexts and Orthodox Churches would indicate that these individuals are imbibing information from a shared constellation of sources and adapting it slightly to their local setting. These sources that fundamentalist clergy are reading, be they social media groups or analog newsletters, have contributed to a trans-national ideological foment that furnishes rather specific eschatological

⁴⁵ In Ukraine, two separate Orthodox churches that claim to represent the majority of believers in the country: the Orthodox Church of Ukraine and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate. The former is recognized as autocephalous by the Ecumenical Patriarchate as of 2018, while the latter is a sub-unit of the Russian Orthodox Church. Ukraine is split in this chart because the OCU urged believers to stay at home and held services in private. Meanwhile, the metropolitan of the UOC-MP interpreted the laws differently, claiming that conducting services in churchyards was acceptable.

⁴⁶ Both Czechia and Slovakia had lockdowns at this time. They therefore only offered individual spiritual services to believers (“Nařízení č. 9 v Souvislosti s Nouzovým Stavem a Mimořádným Opatřením Vlády ČR [Regulation No. 9 in Connection with the State of Emergency and Extraordinary Measures of the Governments of the Czech Republic” 2020).

narratives and turns. Finding the locus and genealogy of this strain of thinking would be an essential exercise for those interested in understanding modern Orthodoxy, its various intellectual currents, and locating individual Churches within the religion's global ideological firmament.

Upon completing this study, the fundamentalist-traditionalist-liberal categorization for religious institutions also stands out as a fruitful distinction that opens new avenues for comparative work outside of established denominational and historical boundaries. While comparing communities in the post-Soviet region is undoubtedly a useful exercise, using the ideological categorization as a vector may yield novel and valuable results. For example, some Jewish communities in Israel and Catholic communities in Central Europe, which may also be characterized as traditionalists, mounted similar challenges to their governments to lift public health restrictions or establish exceptions to the state of emergency. Perhaps analyzing the interaction between states and traditionalist religious communities globally will help leaders expand their repertoires in the complex art of engaging with religion.

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<https://on.ge/story/51989>

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Appendix I: Case Timeline

Date	Event
December 29 th , 2019	Wuhan City government in Hubei Province, China begins tracking the outbreak of a novel coronavirus (“Hubei Timeline” n.d.)
January 27 th , 2020	Georgian airports begin checking passengers for coronavirus (JAMNews Tbilisi 2020a)
January 19 th , 2020	Georgia pauses flights with China (JAMNews Tbilisi 2020b)
February 26 th , 2020	The first coronavirus patient, a Georgian citizen returning from Iran, is confirmed in Georgia (JAMNews Tbilisi 2020c)
February 29 th , 2020	Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church releases a statement announcing that they will not change the methods by which communion is shared with believers (Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church 2020a)
March 1 st , 2020	Patriarch Ilia II addresses the topic of the coronavirus in a sermon, sharing a vision (<i>Tabula</i> 2020b)
March 2-4 th , 2020	The government suspends attendance at all educational facilities, Georgia begins repatriation of citizens from abroad and preparing quarantine zones, disinfection of public spaces, public gatherings banned (“Measures Implemented by the Government of Georgia against Coronavirus” 2020, 8)
March 11 th , 2020	WHO officially declares that COVID-19 is a global pandemic (Adhanom 2020)
March 12 th , 2020	The Georgian Ministry of Health reports 24 confirmed cases of coronavirus in the country; the Georgian government asks the population to work from home (JAMNews Tbilisi 2020d)
March 17 th , 2020	Orthodox Church organizes blessing of the streets of Tbilisi to combat the virus (Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church 2020e)
March 19 th , 2020	Statement of the Patriarchate on disagreements among the clergy (Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church 2020b)
March 20 th , 2020	Statement of the Holy Synod released (Holy Synod of the Georgian Orthodox Church 2020)

March 21 st , 2020	<p>Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia announces the beginning of the state of emergency, including restrictions on gatherings of over ten individuals</p> <p>Despite the announcement of the state of emergency, Orthodox Church services are held in the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity, and PM Gakharia meets with church officials to explain that the ban on meetings of 10+ people should not be “taken literally” by the Church (JAMNews Tbilisi 2020e)</p>
March 23 rd , 2020	Bolnisi and Marneuli municipalities quarantined due to development of cluster (“Measures Implemented by the Government of Georgia against Coronavirus” 2020, 23)
March 24 th , 2020	A group of NGOs and lawyers publishes a letter requesting that the government create conditions to maximize religious liberty safely and also calling on religious communities, and the Orthodox Church, in particular, to not violate epidemiological measures (“Address to the Authorities of Georgia and Religious Organizations” 2020)
March 25 th , 2020	Statement of the Patriarchate in response to media criticism (Patriarchate of the Georgian Orthodox Church 2020d)
March 30 th , 2020	<p>PM Giorgi Gakharia announces a nationwide curfew from 21:00 to 6:00, which will extend from March 31st through April 21st (the day after Easter)</p> <p>Gatherings of more than three individuals are prohibited (JAMNews Tbilisi 2020f)</p>
April 4 th , 2020	Georgia records first death from the novel coronavirus, a woman from the Marneuli/Bolnisi cluster.
April 10 th , 2020	Quarantine of Lentekhi municipality (“Measures Implemented by the Government of Georgia against Coronavirus” 2020, 23)
April 12 th , 2020	<p>Partial quarantine in Kobuleti municipality;</p> <p>Beginning of Holy Week</p>
April 13 th , 2020	Quarantine of Khidiskuri village in the Khashuri municipality
April 13-19 th , 2020	An increase in the daily number of new cases (up from single digits to the 30s) prompting health professionals to warn the population that the first wave could begin in the following weeks, asking them to stay home from Easter festivities (<i>Civil GE</i> 2020a)

April 14 th , 2020	A priest from Tbilisi's St. John the Theologian church and a security guard for the Patriarchate are both confirmed to have coronavirus (JAMNews Tbilisi 2020h)
April 17 th , 2020	All travel by car banned to prevent holiday clusters and visiting cemeteries prohibited; Statement from the Patriarchate clarifying that ban on travel by car does not apply to clergy members; Mirtagi Asadov, the Chairman of the Supreme Religious Administration of Georgia's Muslims, was arrested and held for questioning at the State Security Service in connection with the protests in Marneuli and Bolnisi and a televised interview in which he compared the position and rights of Muslims in Georgia unfavorably to that of Orthodox Christians (EMC 2020b; JAMNews Tbilisi 2020i) 13 clergy members and 16 theologians draft an open letter refusing to take part in liturgical life (<i>Interpress News Georgia</i> 2020b; <i>NetGazeti</i> 2020b)
April 19–20 th , 2020	Easter Night and Easter Sunday, attendees spend all night in churchyards across the country to avoid arrest for breaking curfew.
April 22 nd , 2020	Hundreds of ethnic Azerbaijani villagers in the Marneuli district destroy their crops in protest against the quarantine regime due to economic distress and frustration with local authorities (Avaliani 2020)
April 27 th , 2020	Ban on car travel ends
May 11 th , 2020	Tbilisi reopens in a limited manner, but the curfew remains in place.
May 17 th , 2020	Day of Family Purity observed in the Church; City streets are blessed.
May 22 nd , 2020	End of state of emergency Parliament passes amendment to the Forest Code of Georgia, permitting Orthodox Churches to gain ownership of forest areas of up to 20 hectares within the vicinity of churches around the country (<i>Civil GE</i> 2020b)

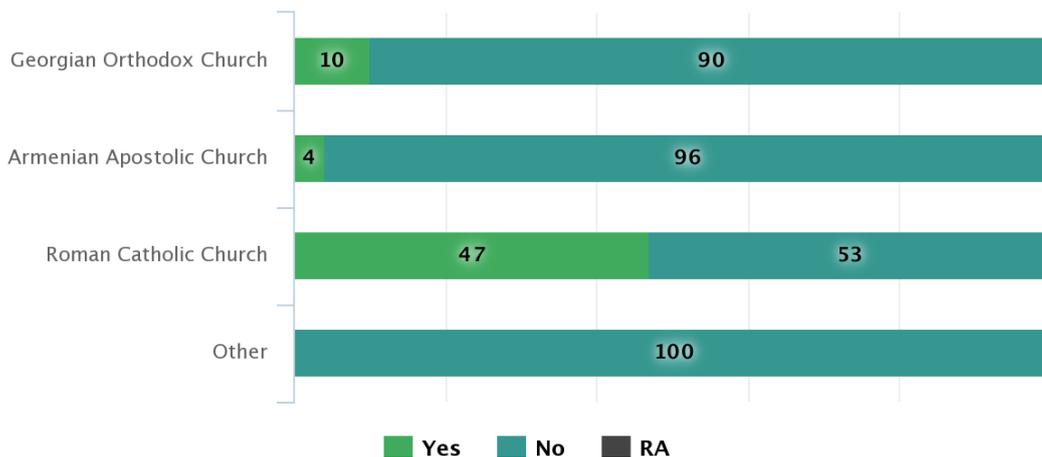
Appendix II. CRRC and NDI Studies

NDI Public Attitudes in Georgia, June 2020 *Based randomized telephonic interviews, 1550 respondents*

II.1 Attendance of Easter services in Church by denomination

ATTEASTER: Did you attend Easter service in church?
by RELGION: Respondent's religion (%)

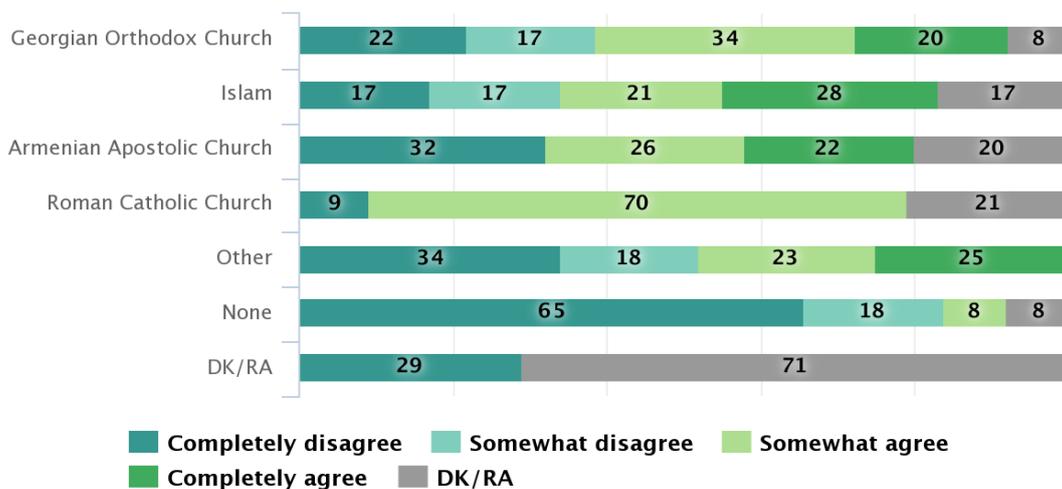
ATTEASTER: Question was asked only to those who named any of the Christian denominations



NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, June 2020
Retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

II.2 Claim that faith protects believers from COVID by denomination

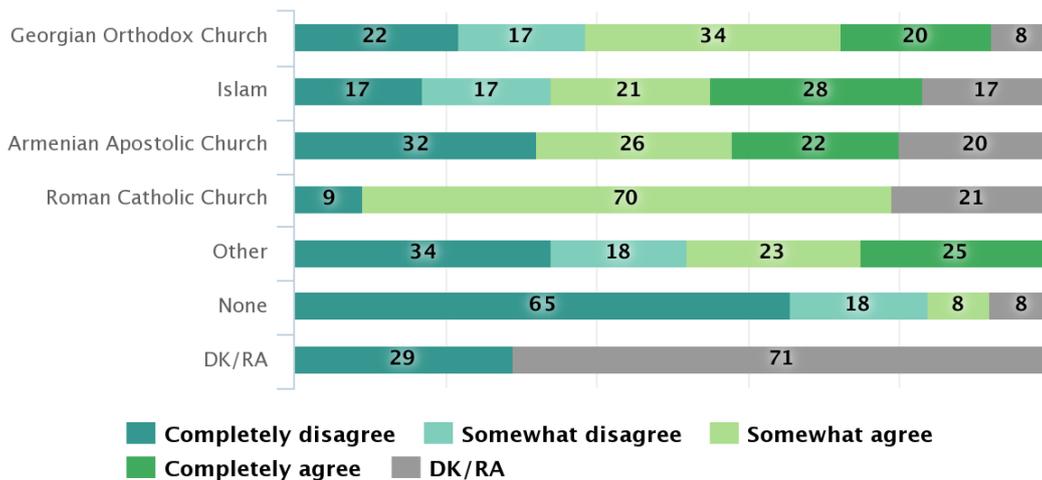
FTHPRCOR: Faith protects believers of my religion from
getting infected with the coronavirus
by RELGION: Respondent's religion (%)



NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, June 2020
Retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

II.3 Claim that faith protects believers from COVID by denomination

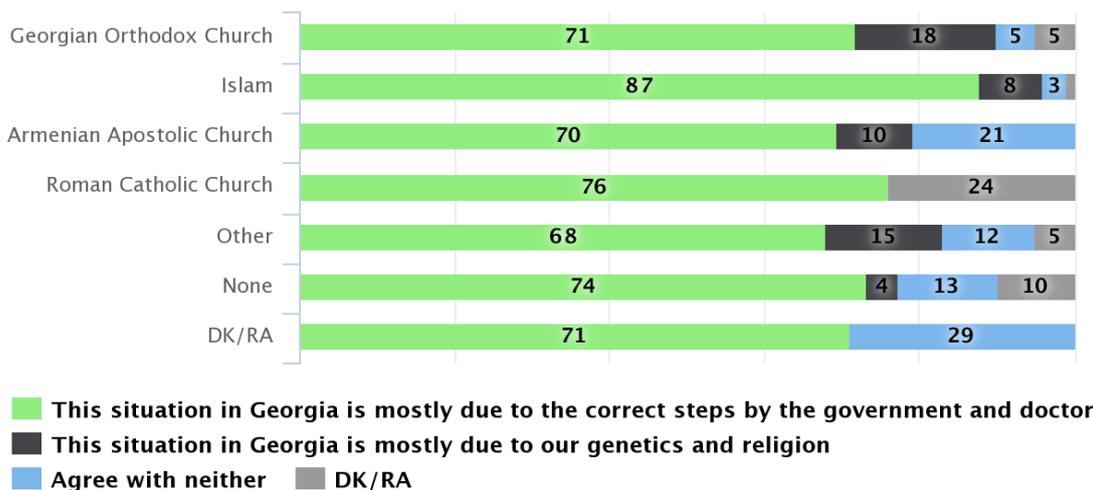
FTHPRCOR: Faith protects believers of my religion from getting infected with the coronavirus
by RELGION: Respondent's religion (%)



NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, June 2020
Retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

II.4 Reasons for why Georgia has a lower COVID spread and mortality rates, broken down by religion

REAGELOC: Reason for Georgia having lower level of spread and mortality rate of coronavirus
by RELGION: Respondent's religion (%)



NDI: Public attitudes in Georgia, June 2020
Retrieved from <http://caucasusbarometer.org/>

Appendix III. Participant Information Sheet for Interviewees



University
of Glasgow

College of Social
Sciences

Participant Information Sheet: COVID-19 and the Georgian Orthodox Church

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take some time to decide whether or not you wish to take part:

This study is about responses to the COVID-19 epidemic. I am conducting interviews to gain a more nuanced understanding of the role that the Georgian Orthodox Church has played in addressing the current crisis. I hope to draw conclusions about the state of Church-State relations in Georgia based on information and views gathered from these interviews.

Interviews should take approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you may decide at any time that you wish to stop.

Any personal identifying information, such as names and place of residence, divulged over the course of this interview will be anonymized in transcripts. An ID number will be used in the place of your name and only I, the researcher, will have access to this information.

You may elect to be anonymous or named in the final thesis. If you choose to remain anonymous, confidentiality will be respected unless there are compelling and legitimate reasons for this to be breached. If this was the case, I would inform you of any decisions that might limit your confidentiality. Please note that full confidentiality may not be guaranteed; due to the limited size of the participant sample.

Data collected in these interviews will be used in the production of my Master's Thesis, which is being written under faculty supervision from both Ilia State University (Tbilisi, Georgia) and the University of Glasgow (Glasgow, The United Kingdom). All digital files created during this project, including recordings and transcripts, will be saved in password-protected and encrypted files for 10 years.

Thank you for reading this.

Contacts for Further Information

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Supervisor: Federica Prina, **federica.prina@glasgow.ac.uk**

This project has been considered and approved by the School Ethics Forum of the School of Social and Political Science of the University of Glasgow.

If you have any concerns regarding the conduct of this research project, you can contact the Ethics Officer of the School Ethics Forum, Dr Susan Batchelor, email: **susan.batchelor@glasgow.ac.uk**

Appendix IV. Interview Questions

This is a sampling of the questions that I asked interviewees. In some cases, I asked them specifically about topics that they had written on in the past as they related to this case.

General Responses: Were you surprised by the statements of Church officials during this period? What about government officials?

Church-State Relations:

How would you characterize the changes in Church-State relations since independence?

Why do you think that the government was unwilling to contradict the Church or ban, for example, the use of shared spoons?

Do you believe that the concept of *symphonia* is relevant in the contemporary Georgian political context? Does this ideal influence Church-State relations?

Church's Theology and Public Relations: How do you understand the Church's definition of tradition? To what extent can liturgical tradition be adapted?

I noticed a number of priests publicly announced that they were dissenting and not holding services. Would you say that it is normal for priests to be so transparent about their differences of opinion? Is the Church's leniency towards public discord strategic or a matter of a lack of control?

Might the reluctance to issue top-down orders have been an effort to safeguard *ecclesial economy* (*oikonomia*) of bishops?

I saw a number of eschatological discourses emerge during this period. Where do you understand the origins of these ideas to be? Would you characterize them as more marginal or more mainstream?

Do you see any changes in how the Church communicates with the public over the past several years?

International Dimension: To what extent do you think the various Orthodox Churches consulted with one another? Do you think that there was any kind of inter-Orthodox discussion about how to manage the practical barriers to worship?