



## Young and in Love (with God)

by Clément Girardot - 03.12.2012

The Orthodox Church of Georgia is attracting a post-communist generation in need of stability point of reference. Nine years after the Rose Revolution, the young generation reflects the hopes and contradictions of this ancient Christian nation, torn between desire for freedom and preservation of tradition.

About thirty kilometers from Tbilisi, nestled in a valley, the village of Norio seems lulled by the winter. A snow-covered route snakes through the forest to the monastery of Gvtaeba. Restored in 1993, the monastery was funded in the sixth century by St. Antoine of Marktopi. At the top of a ridge nearby stand a tower and a giant cross at the place where the Syrian monk lived alone for fifteen years.

### Gela

Gela Barshovi, 23, likes to come to this peaceful and isolated place to pray. Every two weeks, the young Finance Ministry employee makes the trip from the capital in order to celebrate the ten o'clock mass. Growing up in a family where faith held a very important place, he became very religious at 18. "The Orthodox religion is the basis of everything in my life," he says. "I go to mass Saturday and Sunday, I pray thirty minutes each day and I observe Lent." Gela's journey is typical of his generation – people aged 18 to 35 – who were raised after the Soviet Union fell and for whom Orthodox religion plays a very important role.

In this Caucasian country of 4.5 million people, young people often make themselves stand out by fervently practicing their religion. According to a study done by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers in 2010, Georgians between 18 and 35 years of age were largely religious: 46% went to a religious service at least once a month. 33% of people 36 to 55 years of age and 21% of people past the age of 56 are similarly diligent.

"Since the end of Communism, Orthodox religion is booming, and the number of believers is growing, especially among the young people," Gela boasts, who visit the Gvtaeba monastery as well as the churches in Tbilisi. "There are more believers among young people than among people who lived under Communism. These people [who lived under Communism] are proud that their children are more religious, even if they find it hard

to attend church. They just can't manage to change their mindset." Shorena Turkiashvili, a sociologist at the State University at Tbilisi, has often found herself in an awkward position with her own students, who were often raised in a more religious and nationalistic household than her own. "I've only been Orthodox for four years; before I was an atheist. The first class of the semester I taught here, it was very tense," she remembers. "One of the students would ask me seemingly all the time, 'Are you an atheist?' If you don't praise the Orthodoxy or if you want to study religions equally, some people will consider you an enemy. Since I have started wearing a cross, people see me as one of them and they will be more apt to listen to what I have to say." She has begun to notice not only the rise of religious practice but its affirmation in public. In the Tbilisi streets, many people make the sign of the cross three times when they pass a church.

### Zura

Before entering the historic Sioni cathedral, the faithful kiss the stones laid out on the porch. Zura Kobalia, 24, is a sexton in this cathedral. He spends around ten hours a week in this place, which is a sacred emblem of Georgian identity. It is a bit too much for his mother, who worries when she sees him leave very early in the morning, already tired. "I help the priest during the mass, I distribute the wafers, and I am at the service of all those who come to the church," he explains. Situated in old Tbilisi, Sioni was for a long time the premier church of the country, up until the opening of the giant cathedral of the Trinity in 2004. When he is not donning his sexton robe, Zura likes to strum on his electric guitar. He admires Jimi Hendrix, Joe Satriani and Santana. But he especially admires Ilia II. "The Patriarch is an exceptional person, and his life and modesty are an example. Thanks to him, the Orthodox religion became very popular." Now 78, Ilia II has been the head of the Orthodox Church since 1977. He is much admired by young people who share pictures and videos of him on social networks. But Zura has more pressing preoccupations.

Like 35.5% of people aged 15 to 24, he is unemployed. From time to time, he does odd jobs in the hotel industry but he hopes to find a stable job. Daily life for the majority of Georgians is precarious, despite 7% GDP growth since 2011.

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Like Zura, whose family was forced to flee the city of Sukhumi after the war in Abkhazia in 1993, young people today were raised in the turbulent '90s, which was marked by civil war and shortages. According to sociologist Shorena Turkiashvili, the origins of the current phenomenon begun its descent during this decade when leaders openly expressed their religiosity. "After 1991, society's elite openly showed their faith. Even the mafia, who are respected, did the same thing." Faced with the decay of most social institutions, churches became places of socialization for young people. "During that time, there was nothing to do, especially in the suburbs or in the countryside. Even now, things to do are rare. During this crisis, young people could meet one another by going to church and to the market."

### Tako

The main street of the Georgian capital is Rustaveli Avenue. Surrounded by old neo-Classical buildings with some Moorish touches: theatres, stores, museums and restaurants is the heart of social life in Tbilisi. Tako Gabaidze, 21, often has a snack at Café Entrée, which offers French pastries. This business student at the American University of Georgia hardly goes to church, except when she makes trips around the country. "Religion is an important part of Georgian identity but I wish it were otherwise," she laments. "It is somewhat automatic: You are Georgian so you are Orthodox." Although she was baptised, she prefers to call herself an agnostic.

Together, Muslim, Armenian, Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant minorities make up 20% of the population of Georgia. The majority of Tako's friends are not religious and she confesses that sometimes it is difficult to debate with young religious people. "In this country, religion and tradition are very connected," she declares. For twenty years, the rise of a religious nationalism has also led to a downfall of other identities. It has given birth to a unique line of thought centered around Georgian traditions, such as separation of gender roles, as well as marriage and virginity. On all these subjects, the Patriarch of Georgia, a national institution as the head of the Orthodox Church, holds very conservative views which are now largely disseminated into society. Even though the majority of young people accept these rules, they have begun to question them more and more, especially

on the issue of female virginity. "According to social and religious norms, [girls] have to stay a virgin until they're married," Tako explains. "I talk about this with my friends, but it's taboo for a lot of people. And also if you require girls to be virgins, why are men allowed to do as they please? Young people are suffering under these rules. The majority of them think that you have to get married to have an intimate relationship with someone so there are a lot of young people getting married (between 15 and 20 years of age) and most of them get divorced soon after."

Furthermore, a great pressure is put on young wives to give birth; in order to do this, many young girls stop their studies. Tako states that "the majority of Georgians think that you have to have a lot of children. For women, their role is to raise them and have as many of them as possible." Paradoxically, birth rates in Georgia are low when compared with other countries in the European community.

But more young women are putting their studies and careers first. Traditional distribution of roles and the conformist mentality which accompany them no longer correspond to this vision of the urban youth who travel, speak several languages and receive news about the entire world from the Internet. Tako tells us, "I have several friends who left to live abroad. They came back completely different. In the beginning, they were depressed and withdrawn because they had lived through a cultural shock. Then they realized that it is possible to change what one doesn't like."

### Tamta

Behind the gigantic row of columns that dot its entrance, the State University of Tbilisi is a Kafkaesque labyrinth of hallways and staircases. With 18,000 students, it is the largest university in the country. Raised in a family that was "Orthodox, like everyone here," Tamta Sikharulidze, 21, is a student in International Relations. A non-practicing believer, she cautiously observes the religious zeal of her classmates. "I have a friend who goes to church, and he's even thought about becoming a monk. He studies History and he wrote a dissertation which tried to prove that the Georgian kings were descendants of God!"

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“In Georgia, public life and religion are mixed too often,” she claims. In May 2010, a group of radical Orthodox, including students, protested in front of the Ilia Chavchavadze University in Tbilisi, which they accused of hold anti-Orthodox ideas. The university had just hosted a presentation on a book which was deemed blasphemous, and the president of the university had refused to open several prayer rooms for students. In her daily life, Tamta thinks that there is often a large gap between social norms and personal desires. “I think that a lot of people are not religious because their behavior is completely contradictory.” Many young people here lead double lives in order to keep up appearances. The pressure to conform to the dominant model is strong. “There are norms for Georgian women and norms for Georgian men,” Tamta says. “Our society tries to change you so that you fit into a mold. But there is a lot of hypocrisy here as well. People do something because of an obligation and two minutes later, they do the exact opposite.”

### Nini

Built in the same architectural style as the old modest churches, the cathedral of the Trinity is unconventional. 68 meters high, it occupies a space of around 5,000 square meters. Alone on the summit of a hill, it is the symbol of the Orthodox revival. Once night has fallen, it resembles a spaceship preparing for liftoff. Nini Tziashvili, who is 20 years old, joins the crowd of faithful who gather in front of the beautiful icons cast in gold. However, she does not like the impersonal atmosphere where people come to pray without a sincere personal journey. “So many young people go to church to meet one another or go simply because it's the 'in' thing to do!” The Classical Literature student prefers the silence and the intimacy of the monasteries to which she goes several times a year. “There are times when I wonder if I'd like to lead a monastic life. I want to stay in the monastery because when I am there I pray all the time, I am calm, and I feel well.” The redhead is a fan of Pink Floyd, and she may not necessarily fit the look of a young religious person who subsumes to rigorous dress codes with somber colors and long dresses for women. “People tell me that I act very paradoxically because I have very unusual ideas. For example, I once shaved my head and everyone looked at me strangely!”

Nini adopts these supposedly contradictory behaviors because being Orthodox does not mean following a pre-established model. “Christianity gives men free will. Each has the responsibility to do what he wants, whether it be regarding virginity or other things.” Even if she could never fathom having premarital sex, she does not think that the Orthodox religion is restrictive. “Religion doesn't tell you that love or that certain feelings are forbidden, contrary to what people say. God created the world with love. Religion doesn't forbid having a boyfriend, the limits are not written.” These constraints, it is said, come not from religion but families, from tradition and from prejudices.

### Besik

Despite the official positions of the Patriarch of Georgia, which are very conservative and very hostile to Western culture, many young believers put the Church's teachings in perspective. Besik Liparteliani, 26, graduated from the Tbilisi seminary situated in an old building in front of Sioni Cathedral. He wanted to become a priest, but now he questions this, disappointed by the actual operation of the Church. Sitting in a classroom full of religious icons, he recalls his first years of study. “In the beginning, I didn't want to have anything to do with other religions because there is a very xenophobic tendency in the Georgian Church.” But then he opened up to other beliefs, he read a lot and he became more acquainted with ecumenical theories. His critical mind began to sharpen. “The Georgian Church says that homosexuality is a sin and vehemently condemns it. But there are also Protestant theologians who argue that it's not contrary to religion.” Marginalized in the seminary, he has used his pen to share his ideas in writing. He has especially criticized machismo, the lack of transparency, and the religious institution's desire for social control. He also criticizes certain priests who chose the profession not for the vocation but because it is a stable and well-paid job.

Although the economic situation in Georgia remains uncertain, the Orthodox Church is not having any job crisis. Besik hopes to be able to begin his Masters in Religious Sociology in Germany. Georgians from all generations are leaving to find jobs in Russia or Europe. Since the 1991 independence, Georgia has become a land of emigration and its population has dropped by

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20%. Disappointed by the policies of Mikhail Saakashvili, many young people voted for the opposition movement, which is being called the “Georgian Dream,” in the legislative elections in October 2012. Formed and financed by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, who is now prime minister, this movement which is composed of many different parties with differing political orientations has won a very important victory. The Georgian Dream party will now have to adapt to reality and provide solid answers to the social and economic problems of young Georgians.

### Vakhtang

In the heart of Tbilisi, overlooking the Kura River, is the statue of the King Vakhtang Gorgasali who founded the city in the fifth century. His reign was marred by several wars against the Persians. The statue can be found on postcards of the city, with the historic church of Metekhi on the background. They are two very strong symbols. Throughout the centuries, the heirs to the Kingdom of Georgia and the Orthodox Church have been almost inseparable. Under the evangelizing work of Saint Nino, Georgia became the second state, after Armenia, having officially Christianity in 326 A.D.. The Orthodox Church served as a unifying force that has united the Georgian nation against Arab, Persian, Mongol, and Ottoman invasions. Then it symbolized resistance to the Russification of Georgia and to the Soviet dictatorship. Once victims of persecution during the Communist period, the Orthodox Church has once again become a central institution in the new post-1991 Republic, which was the wish of its first president Zviad Gamsakhurdia. Dead in 1993 under very unclear circumstances, his epitaph is comprised of these words:

“The way of the Georgian nation is the way of Christ: his thorny crucifixion and his inevitable resurrection.” ❖