Church as a homeland and home as a place of worship

The transformation of religiosity among Georgian migrants in Paris

Sophie Zviadadze

Introduction

‘Going to church is like being in Georgia for a while,’ recalled Anna, a 27-year-old lady living in Paris. The attachment to homeland has a distinctive character for Georgians living in the diaspora. Living in a foreign country revitalizes the nationalistic sentiments and religious belonging. Under the emotional stress of adapting to a new culture and set of values, religion also changes among Georgian migrants. During the process of integration into the new society, the rate of religious participation decreases, and individuals form their religious orientations more independently. They are less likely to be linked with institutional religion and religious authorities. This is in contrast to strong institutional religion, the authority of religious leaders, and traditions in Georgia. Among post-socialist countries, Georgia’s religious boom has survived the longest and it continues to stand out for having the highest rate of religiosity among post-Soviet countries. After the demise of the socialist regime and against the backdrop of systemic transformation, the importance of religiosity has been on the rise in many countries in Eastern Europe (Pollack et al. 1998; Pollack 2011). After the restoration of Georgia’s independence, the importance of religion gained a new momentum. For many Georgians, the importance of religion in everyday life is high. Surveys show that 81% of respondents consider themselves to be Orthodox Christians, with 56% in the 18–35 years group going to church once a month or more (Caucasus Barometer 2013). According to another survey, 73% believe in God while 81% of respondents see religion as key component of national identity (Pew Research 2018). The specific aspects of religious landscape in today’s Georgia are ‘visibility of religion’ in the public sphere and the high level popularity of the Georgian Orthodox Church. The role of the church as a stronghold of national culture has been strongly upheld by religious leaders and the wider public. The transition from Soviet secular ideology to high religiosity shows signs of the ‘deprivatization of religion’ as well (Casanova 1994, 1996).
The religious life of Georgian migrants in Paris reveals the contrasting picture of religiosity for Georgians living in Georgia. This chapter explores how religiosity is changing for Georgian migrants when they live in other countries. Is religion important for Georgian migrants after moving to a foreign country? How does a secular and pluralistic society influence the religious identity and practices of Georgian migrants in Paris? This chapter will primarily focus on the religious identity of second-wave Georgian migrants. The diaspora gathers mostly students and labor migrants. The diaspora is constantly changing, in contrast to the first wave Georgian diaspora (the descendants of Georgians who migrated to France after the Soviet occupation of Georgia in 1921). In general, the waves of Georgian migration to France happened in two historical periods. Migrants of the first wave sought shelter in France after the Soviet occupation of Georgia in 1921, which resulted in the destruction of the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918–1921). In the aftermath of the collapse of the Russian Empire and the 1917 Revolution, Georgia’s First Democratic Republic was founded on May 26, 1918. In 1921, the Constituent Assembly of Georgia adopted the first constitution of the Republic. On February 25, the Soviet Army invaded the country and declared Soviet rule. The second wave of migrants followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and Georgia’s independence. The driving force of the second wave was a long and devastating process of political and social transformation of the country. The two generations of migrants are marked by the two Georgian Orthodox parishes in Paris: St. Nino’s Church founded in 1927 catered to first generation migrants. St. Tamar’s Church, built in 2009, has since been frequented by second generation Georgian migrants. Each church has its own Georgian parish.

The theoretical overview

The vitality of religion is determined by various factors in post-socialist countries. ‘New freedom of religion’ and an ideological vacuum are typical of countries going through political and social transformation (Pollack 2003). Georgia was not an exception to the post-socialist revitalization of religion after the change in political system. Generally, in order to explain rising religiosity in post-socialist Eastern Europe, scholars’ arguments are based on the specifics of religious culture in the region (Norris and Inglehart 2004). The transformation of religion in post-communist Georgia can be labeled as the deprivatization of religion (Casanova 1994). The religious renaissance in the post-independence period presumably represents part of the more general proclivity of the ‘return of religions’ and the ‘desecularization of the world’ (Berger 1999). Sociologists believe that post-communist countries offer a different and more complex picture of religious transformation (Tomka 1995). Scholars take a look at the features and the dynamics that characterize state building, nationalism and religiosity both in Soviet and post-Soviet periods (Spohn 2012, p. 30). The link between national and religious identity is common in many Eastern European countries. This phenomenon is extremely vivid in Georgia. In describing the religious transformation in Georgia, the significance of religion for cultural and national identity should be kept in mind. As Hervieu-Léger argues, religion in modernity may serve not only as a source for experiencing spirituality but also as a chain of memories through which knowledge of the past and the myths of the formation of the nation, culture and history are connected to the present. The link between religion, memory and identity allows religion to continue to exist in modern times (Hervieu-Léger 2000). Casanova also argues that the extent to which religion is connected to the past of a nation may account for the vitality of the church and religion in the modern day (Casanova 1994). One of the characteristics of post-Soviet Georgian society is the emergence of religion in the public sphere, with a strong influence of the Georgian Church as homeland, home as place of worship.
Orthodox Church over political affairs. In a new political and social reality, the Church managed to reinforce its authority by monopolizing the national space and thus shaping the new national narrative (Serrano 2010; Zedania 2011). In general, the tradition of a national church shared by countries with an Orthodox culture nurtures and facilitates the closeness of nationalism and religion. Over the course of many years the Georgian Orthodox Church and the Patriarch Ilia II have enjoyed the highest trust ratings among citizens. According to the Pew Research Center, 81% of respondents in Georgia see religion as a key factor of their national identity (Pew Research Center 2018). It is thus not surprising that many studies focus on religion and nationalism in Georgia. However, in the Georgian context, a question still needs to be answered regarding whether we could expect secularization with the political and social transformation of Georgian society, more specifically a decline in the social function of institutional religion (or religious privatization) (Dobbelaere 2002). Paradigmatically, the scholars view with suspicion the ‘compatibility’ of secularism and pluralism (as compared to Catholicism and Protestantism) with Orthodox Christianity (Martin 1996; Berger 2004). But how is it being Orthodox Christian in a different cultural environment? How can secular society influence one’s religious identity and religious expression? Living in the diaspora could be one of the possible avenues to observe religious transformation. After moving to a foreign country, a migrant’s religion may change. Under the stress of adapting to a new culture, secular and urban life, the role of religion could change. Gabriel, for example, considers modernity and the process of individualization as the key drivers of religious privatization. He argues that the very process of individualization accounts for the diminished role of the church and religion (Gabriel 1996). For Taylor, religious experience and religiosity in the modern age become part of ‘expressive individualism,’ and are separated from institutional religion and religious authority (Taylor 2002, p. 84). Along similar lines, Luckmann offered the view that the privatization of religion in Western societies does not mean its demise, but rather the transformation of the form of religion, including the decline of the role of institutional religion (Luckmann 1991). Today, the transformation of religion and religiosity becomes even more diverse and eclectic, which involves privatization, deprivatization and the rise of different religious expressions (spirituality, New Age, patch-work religiosity, popular religiosity) (Knoblauch 2008).

Living in the diaspora could explain why and how religious practices change. Religion helps people to adapt to a new context—‘to negotiate their minority status and rights’ (Knott 2016, p. 71). When people move from their home country to another, they are often exposed to a totally different cultural and social environment. People experience new and different cultures, values and social rules. They live with new stresses and pressures in a foreign country. As Connor argues, in this situation religion could be a lower priority for immigrants. Therefore, immigrants are often generally less religious after moving between countries (Connor 2014, p. 50). But Connor offers another explanation for the changing meaning of religion among migrants. It is that their religious or spiritual lives become important, so they become active and go to churches or mosques or other religious institutions. In his broad study, Connor observes four different forms of relations between religion and migration: moving faith, changing faith, integrating faith, transferring faith (Connor 2014). Yet, there could be other patterns. An immigrant’s religion changes, and it has both positive and negative effects. Connor takes into account the specificities of immigrant religious groups, the place of settlement and the type of integration (Connor 2014, p. 75). As for the role of religion among migrants, the scientific community views this question from many angles (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Johnson 2012; Garnett and Harris 2013; Garnett and Hausner 2015). Researchers pay close attention to the pattern existing between the
transformation of religiosity and the integration of migrants (Van Tubergen 2007). A widely shared view suggests that religiosity becomes stronger in migrant groups, and the rise of religiosity is particularly evident in Europe (Lagrange 2014).

However, this picture is not homogeneous. Rather, it may be influenced by the laws of a host country, as well as local religious and cultural diversity. Researchers believe that security issues and a level of integration and religious diversity have a significant influence over religiosity among migrants. However, there is a common characteristic that suggests that migrants are more religious than their host communities. In such cases, the economic standing of the country, its level of religious pluralism and the degree of protection of the freedom of religion all have a share in shaping patterns of religiosity (Aleksynska and Chiswick 2011). Regarding these questions and in general, the religious culture of Orthodox Christian diasporas and, specifically, the religious life of Georgian migrants, is less researched.

This chapter draws on various qualitative methods including face-to-face interviews, a biographical narrative and ethnographic fieldwork. The study focuses on second-wave migrants who arrived in Paris after the collapse of the Soviet Union at different times for a temporary stay. All the respondents have led intensive religious lives. In total, 55 persons (35 students and 20 labor migrants) of both sexes and with different records of living abroad, were interviewed. The specific feature of Georgian migrant life in Paris is that they do not live together in certain places. The only time they meet each other is whenever they gather at a Georgian Orthodox parish or whenever they celebrate National Day (May 26th).

Religion as culture and ‘church as the homeland’

The waves of Georgian migration to France took place in two historical periods: migrants of the first wave sought shelter in France after the Soviet occupation of Georgia in 1921, which resulted in the destruction of the First Georgian Republic. The First Georgian Republic was founded on May 26, 1918. In 1921 the Constituent Assembly of Georgia adopted the first Constitution of the Republic. On February 25, the Soviet Army invaded the country and declared Soviet Rule. The ruling government of the Georgian Republic and most of the members of the Founding Council left for France in 1921. In 1929, Georgian migrants founded St. Nino Church and Parish in Paris. The community was governed not by the Georgian Orthodox Church but by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople because of the political situation back in Georgia. Georgian migrants refused to have anything to do with the Georgian Orthodox Church for its collaboration with the Soviet authorities. There was no contact between the Georgian Orthodox Church and St. Nino’s parish up until the 1960s. The first contact between the Georgian Orthodox Church and St. Nino’s parishioners was established in 1962, when the Patriarch Efrem II of the Georgian Orthodox Church visited members of the Georgian diaspora at Leuville, near Paris, during his visit to France, where he took part in the World Council of Churches (WCC).

This research is focused on the second wave of migrants, which followed the collapse of the Soviet Union and Georgia’s independence. According to official statistics, a wave of outward migration from Georgia after independence reached its peak in 1992–1996. Up until 2003, migratory flows remained relatively low and stable. However, the rate of migration has been on the rise since 2004 (Badurashvili 2012). The periods of migration of Georgians abroad coincide with significant political and socio-economic fluctuations in the country’s recent history (CRRC/ISET 2010). The driving force of the second wave was a long and devastating process of political and social transformation that befell the country, together with social and economic crisis, the civil war and ethnic conflicts. The 1990s saw
the beginning of labor migration to the West. Later on, during a period of relative stability, Georgian youth started to leave the country not only in search of better economic opportunities but also to pursue education.

Descendants of the first migrants continue to attend services at St. Nino’s Church, which is also known as ‘the church of the old generation of migrants.’ The second, St. Tamar’s Church, is located in a suburb of Paris (Villeneuve-Saint-Georges), and has been in operation since 2009. Both churches are considered as ‘little Georgia’ in France. The church creates sacred and national spaces abroad. It is not unusual for diasporic nationalism. It often involves attachment to the imagined homeland. Affinity between religious and nationalist ideas is one of the characteristics of religious culture in Georgia. This factor contributed to the growing reputation of the Georgian Orthodox Church after independence. In the process of social and political transformation, the Georgian Orthodox Church as a national church acquired the role of ‘protector of everything national.’ The Georgian youth see the role of the church mainly in protecting the national culture and less so in relation to social problems and the protection of vulnerable groups (Zviadadze 2015). Indeed, the role of religion for cultural and national identity is a specific mark of religious culture in Georgia.

Does it matter too for those in the diaspora?

‘When I was a newcomer, I would attend church every Sunday.’ This is something that every migrant says, regardless of the purpose for their arrival and the conditions they have managed to create for themselves as migrants. For newcomers, the church is a sanctuary where migrants, tired of their stressful lives and daily alienation, can seek refuge. The first six months, or even year, of Parisian life, and a fresh start in a new cultural and social environment, are a time when nostalgia becomes too strong to handle. During a migrant’s early period outside their home country, the church is a place for socialization and adaptation. The church is most frequented by au-pair girls and so many Georgians refer to St. Tamar’s Church as ‘The Church of the Au-Pairs.’

St. Tamar’s Church is known as ‘little Georgia’ among its parishioners. ‘When I am in the church, it feels like being back home.’ This statement represents the most common reason why migrants, regardless of their previous level of religiosity, hurry to the church as soon as they arrive in Paris: to cope with longing for ‘ Georgians and Georgian speech.’ Even when patterns of attendance change later on, cultural belonging to the church remains, and they go to celebrate Easter anyway. Many Georgians who have been living in a French environment miss being with Georgians badly. For those Georgians who are poorly integrated into French society (including students and labor migrants), meeting and communicating with Georgians is of utmost importance. In spite of the fact that the migrants of today can have online contact with their families and friends, a physical Georgian environment created by the church is still vital to them. Being in the church remedies the nostalgia. Arguably, however, engagement with fellow Georgians in a religious environment makes it even more complicated to integrate in the host communities. This fear has been raised by some migrants, as well as those who are more engaged in the parish’s activities or who have little exposure to French communities (or local universities).

Life in a parallel society was most evident in the case of migrants arriving in France in the early 1990s. For most migrants living in the French environment, visiting church means ‘visiting Georgia’: ‘As Sunday is my only day-off, I spend it in the church. But I feel good here, I feel as if I am in Georgia’ (Nino, 43). For families living in Paris, the church has a cultural function too. The Georgian language, Georgian songs and dance classes add a national and cultural dimension to the church’s religious space. For these Georgian families, these classes are seen as a means to ‘keep Georgian culture alive, as the
children hear French all the time at home and school’ (Tamar, 46). The church often hosts community initiatives and cultural events, while the church choir members are also trained to perform Georgian folk songs. They often get invited by Georgian parishes in other places to perform for a local Georgian audience. In this respect, the church functions as ‘the keeper of national characteristics’ and religion, as part of culture and tradition, creates a picture of the Georgian community in Paris. So, the church is not only a spiritual space but also, and maybe more so, a cultural space that resembles the nation in a foreign country.

The privatization of religion in Paris among Georgian migrants

‘I do not speak about my religion at work. Once, I said that I was fasting, and my French colleagues were so surprised … They looked at me as if I was strange and an old-fashioned person,’ said 35-year-old Nino, who works in a French company. Nino decided not to mention anything about her religion in her French circle. She is still very religious and goes to the Orthodox Church every Sunday. For her, the church and attendance in the liturgy are much more important than meeting other Georgians. So she goes to other Orthodox Churches. Even so, the frequency of their religious practice is not changing, but she tries not to show her religiosity in public, and does not speak about religious issues: ‘I accept it is France, and here people are very secular. I am religious, but I have a hidden faith.’

There was another factor in adapting to the French secular way of life. Migrants, especially students, became more individualized, busier, and their way of life changes. The major trend observed among Georgian migrants is the declined role of the church and religious practice in their lives over their time in France. My study has discovered that as time passes, Georgian migrants in Paris tend to become busier and stressed and it has impacted on their religious life: ‘when you have only one day-off a week, you just want to spend that time relaxing, just staying at home. I rarely go to church on Sunday.’ (Sophie, 27). Adapting to Parisian life means eventually acquiring a new social circle and becoming better integrated. Often, the Georgian migrant prefers to do other things than going to church: ‘Religion occupies an important place, but with the challenges of the everyday, I cannot manage to go to church. I have two Sundays free every month and sometimes I go out with friends’ (George, 28). So religious life among migrants tends towards the privatization of religion.

When it comes to more successful Georgian migrants, or those who have a long record of living in Paris, it is possible to observe a trend towards the privatization of the culture of leisure (Putnam 1995). The following quote is indicative of the stressful way of life (Simmel 1969).

‘On weekends I go out together with my family … the Georgian church is far from my place and I am tired of being trapped between my job and home … the beauty of Paris fades away within a year … I may want to spend the whole Sunday by myself to rest.’

(Alexander, 30)

A group which can be arbitrarily designated ‘followers of private religiosity’ is the largest and most diverse among Georgian migrants. This is not a group of people with religious identity whom Davie (1994) labels ‘believing without belonging.’ They are people who believe and belong without going to church. However, what does not change in the diaspora life is the celebration of religious holidays, in particular Christmas and Easter:
At Easter I always go to church... I cannot do this on a weekly basis. I keep some icons and candles at home... ones that were brought from Georgia... I am too busy to go every Sunday to Church, but I burn a candle at home.

(David, 28)

The decline in religious practice and preserving only a religious affiliation with Orthodox Christianity can be considered a transformation of religiosity. It is not diminishing the belief but changing the expression of religion. It means that the cultural function of religion is much stronger. The religious practices of Georgians tend to change according to time, socialization and economic standing; their quality of integration; and the social environment. However, despite these changes, Christianity remains indispensable for cultural self-identification. Being a Christian means being Georgian rather than attending the church.

Georgian migrants in Paris demonstrate a greater indifference towards religious institutions and practice, but a strong emphasis on believing in God: ‘I may not go to church, but I prefer having faith in my heart. I do not think one has to go to church on a daily basis’ (Ana, 25). Unlike their compatriots in Georgia, migrants in Paris voice stronger criticisms of the Georgian Orthodox Church, and question religious authorities:

I am not an atheist, but I do have my own opinions with respect to certain things. I do not like what is going on in the Church in Georgia. I do not approve of religious radicalism. Nor do I want a church where the priest never gets questioned, when priests drive Jeeps and their parishioners are hungry in Georgia.

(Tamar, 34)

It should be mentioned that it is not just individual religiosity that is shaped by the new context, but rather the Georgian Orthodox Church abroad too. In Georgia, the Georgian Orthodox Church is concentrated entirely on the strengthening of its public authority and financial power. St. Tamar’s Church seems more ‘social’ than churches in Georgia. The archpriest and parishioners pay regular visits to hospitals where Georgians, who arrived in France for medical purposes, are being treated. St. Tamar’s Church and its parish often organize charity concerts to provide financial assistance to needy families in Georgia. The church is not only a place for social gathering but also a shelter. Those who have no accommodation in Paris for various reasons can stay in the church temporarily. The church also provides a Sunday meal for those who have little means to afford food.

Another characteristic among migrants is that religion is no longer a taboo topic and arguments they provide in support of their views reflect the environment they have been living in: ‘French society is laicistic. They are not religious, but respect the faith of others.’ Migrants demonstrate a transformation in their outlooks, a stronger tolerance towards different opinions and respect for pluralism:

I no longer think that what we have is the best and the oldest... I have seen that others also have their stuff, and even better. I abandoned egocentric thinking... an acknowledgement of diversity helps us make a move towards others. I would frown when I heard that Moroccan guys liked me. Eventually, I tied the knot with a Moroccan man.

(Maya, 37)

Transformation is best observed in their changed attitude towards followers of other religions or those who belong to the LGBT community. On May 17, 2013 around 20 civil activists
announced that they were going to celebrate the international day against homophobia in Tbilisi. It was followed by a massive rally of anti-gay activists including orthodox clergy. The opponents used physical force to settle scores with them:

I was following the events of May 17 online, and I thought to myself that a few years ago I could have been that angry person taking to the streets against homosexuals or their defenders. Now I have changed. One really grows up in some ways ... Homosexuals or people from thousands of other ethnicities are your neighbors or co-workers. It is you who are obsessed with this stuff.

(Alexander, 45)

The privatization of religion is well demonstrated in their criticism of religious institution and its withering authority. This transformation of religiosity is less evident in Georgia, but it is something that is easily observed in Paris. As mentioned earlier, living in the new environment of Paris a migrant’s outlook is also influenced by the process of individualization. Changes in their lifestyle and outlook are best reflected in their independence and individualism: ‘traditions and Georgian public opinions cease to shape your private life ... here you do everything by yourself. You are independent. You have to cope with everything on your own ... it was here also that I acquired a work ethic’ (Irakli, 30).

The transformation is obvious in sexual life (in the form of premarital sexual intercourse) and sexual ethics. New skills are acquired throughout their life in Paris, as well as mental anxieties and a fight for survival which is typical of the modern urban lifestyle in metropolises (Simmel 1969; Wirth 2011): ‘France gave me the power to fight. Many could not pull through, and went back to Georgia’ (David, 29). Because of the accelerated pace of life and the lack of spare time, as well as changes in outlook shaped by pluralistic and secular social environment, religion has become more and more private among Georgian migrants.

**Conclusion**

Migrants bring not only nationalities with them but also their religion and culture (Connor 2014). In the case of Georgian migrants, religion and culture go hand in hand. But they move from a religious country to a secular city, and their religiosity changes in the foreign country. The new social and cultural environment is a challenge for religious life. In the diaspora religion plays either a more significant or less important role in their everyday life. Religion may be a bridge to, or hindrance for, migrants in their integration in the host society. To assume the research on religiosity of Georgian migrants in Paris, religion plays a significant role for newcomers. It is a source of emotional stability and overcoming cultural alienation. For many migrants going to church is being in Georgia for a while. Church is not only a spiritual space but also, and maybe more, a cultural space recreating the nation in a foreign country. Church attendance and religious socialization help them adapt to the new reality and overcome difficulties during the early period. For many, the importance of the church diminishes over time, and migrants who would routinely attend Sunday Mass would later attend just one or two religious celebrations throughout the year. Through the mental chaos of the first period of living in a diaspora, religion has an integrating function, but later religion becomes less important in everyday life. With time, adaptation and increasing integration in society a migrant’s religion tends towards privatization. Urban life in a secular and pluralistic society has influenced the religious expression and religious practices of Georgian migrants in Paris. Migrants have less and less time to go to church, so they burn
candles at home: ‘I believe in God, but I do not attend church services ... I do not think this is the most important thing.’ A growing number of migrants, especially the youth, come to prefer more private forms of religiosity. They are busy, stressed: ‘I believe in God but I cannot manage to go to church ... I may want to spend the whole Sunday all by myself to rest.’ Georgian migrants practice more individual forms of religiosity. This trend is in accordance with the expectation that a modern lifestyle and individualism lead to the privatization of religion (Wilson 1982; Gabriel 1996; Dobbelaere 2002). The decline in religious practice and preserving only a religious affiliation with Orthodox Christianity point to a more cultural function of religion among Georgian migrants.

Signs of the privatization of religion are perhaps among the most important findings of the research. Because this kind of process is not obvious in Georgia. It should also be noted that the findings of the research cannot be generalized to all Georgian diasporas. The religiosity of members of diaspora groups is very much influenced by local culture, society and respective state policies. Even in Paris, migrant religiosity is shaped by a number of factors, including religious life in the homeland, the duration of one’s stay in Paris and the level of their integration into French society.

Migrants express higher tolerance towards different opinions and a respect for pluralism. Years of living in Paris have changed their religious culture, as they have become more tolerant and open towards other religions and cultures. Unlike their compatriots in Georgia, migrants in Paris voice stronger criticism towards the Georgian Orthodox Church and even question religious authorities. Migrants have become more skeptical towards the church’s attitudes to several issues. Religious authorities who are very popular in Georgia do not play an important role in how their life is orientated in Paris. Migrants believe that changes in their lifestyle account for diminished religious practices.

The case of Georgian migrants also verifies other sociological views. In accordance with Luckmann’s (1991) thesis, modernization and individualization lead to a change in the social forms of religion but not to the disappearance of religion. Throughout their lives in French society, a migrant’s belonging to Orthodox Christianity becomes publicly ‘invisible,’ but religion remains a marker of national identity. No matter how religious a person may have been back in Georgia, and what kind of life this person now lives in Paris, for most migrants, religion represents part of their national identity. In this sense, religion as a cultural phenomenon undergoes little changes during their lives in Paris. Religious symbols, feasts and the church are representations of national culture for migrants. For many migrants, in their own words, the Georgian Orthodox Church in Paris is ‘little Georgia.’ In the face of the privatization and individualization of their lives and a diminishing spiritual life, belonging to Christianity is significant for their national identity.

- Respondents’ names in the chapter have been changed.
- Research was conducted in 2016 and was supported by the Project CASCADE—Exploring the Security-Democracy Nexus in the Caucasus, 7th PCRD of EU.

References


