Religion, nationalism and transnationalism in the South Caucasus

Ansgar Jödicke

Introduction

Both nationalism and transnationalism are well-explored phenomena in the study of religion and related disciplines. Nationalism refers to the construction and imagination of a political community (Gellner 1983; Anderson 1991). Transnationalism and transnationalization involve the weakening salience of the nation and appear in a world of existing but possibly fading nation states; they can be a result or an aspect of globalization (Appadurai 1996; Robinson 1998).

How do nationalism and transnationalism relate to each other? Some scholars believe that the prominence of nations and nationalism will decrease through globalization in the 21st century. In this view, transnationalism is a much more important and powerful factor than nationalism. However, a new wave of nationalism in many parts of the world has pushed back the idea of a future political order beyond nation states, and national borders remain important in the 21st century. Today, most scholars admit to the coexistence of nationalism and transnationalization in the modern world and analyse the ways in which they are linked. National borders and transborder relations make up two contrasting sides of globalization. Worldwide exchange and border-crossing authorities generate the ‘glocal’ in economy, politics and culture as a modern form of the ‘local.’ Governmental policy can be nationalist while the same nation’s biggest companies are transnational and neoliberal. This also holds true for religions. Some religious groups strongly support nationalism; others have transnational structures themselves.

Nevertheless, we face a couple of problems when talking about the concurrence of nationalism and transnationalism in the same religious group. Can religious groups contribute to nationalism and maintain strong transnational institutions and relations at the same time? Can religious groups be transnational movements and, simultaneously, adopt national peculiarities or be ‘nationalist’? While this combination is quite common, in reality (Roudometof 2014; Michel et al. 2017) it may remain hidden in scholarship on the topic because scholars need to define limited fields of research like ‘nationalism’ or ‘transnationalism.’ This chapter provides case studies from the South Caucasus where both observations—a religion’s contribution to nationalism and its transnational connections—are highly relevant.
In the South Caucasus, three small states emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. At this time, the territorial or demographic units were anything but clear and homogenous. Rooted in a nationalist upswing in the last years of the Soviet Union, nationalism dominated the public discourse of state-building. Migration after the wars in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia homogenized rather than pluralized the territories—in contrast to migration caused by globalization. Nevertheless, geopolitical and transnational economic issues enormously influenced the development of the three states’ political institutions, their polity and political culture. Energy politics and security politics supported different coalitions between the three states and their powerful neighbours. Thus, state-building occurred in a global environment and nationalism had ambiguous effects. It supported the states’ emerging sovereignty and was a cause for territorial conflicts resulting in breakaway regions and disputed borders. Nationalism and transnationalism are dynamic and intermingling realities in the South Caucasus.

How did religions develop in this area in the process of state-building? This chapter will focus on the way in which religious groups in the South Caucasus manoeuvre between nationalism and transnationalism. The religious landscape in this region is fragmented. Today, we find clear religious majorities supported by secular governments and religious minorities mostly under legal protection. The dominant religious traditions contributed to both nationalism and the state-building processes, while religious minorities stimulated the public discourse about pluralization and democratization. Most religious groups, dominant or minor, maintain transnational connections to people outside their countries. However, the nationalism of religious groups is more obvious in all three countries, and much more has been written about nationalism in the South Caucasus than about transnationalism.

**Theoretical, historical and geopolitical context**

Some theories on nationalism and religion have stimulated complex questions around the definition of ‘religion.’ I will, for the sake of a clear and fruitful approach, stick to a conventional definition of religion. This approach corresponds to political actors’ use of the term ‘religion.’ They refer to the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) as a ‘religious actor,’ for example, and Azerbaijani state authorities target specific Shia groups with ‘laws on religion.’ The analysis will be limited to the institutional side of religion, which is neither identical to nor disconnected from popular religion. Overall, ‘religion/religious’ is a social construct and remains ambiguous, as the case of Yezidis in Armenia will demonstrate. From this perspective, nationalism is a secular phenomenon sometimes adopted by religious groups (Brubaker 2012, p. 15).

A general development in the study of nations and nationalism is the assumption that the ‘nation’ is a political and normative construct (Smith 2003). Mostly, these constructed nations are characterized by a common language, culture and, sometimes, religion. Thus, the powerful nationalist narratives create political communities rather than describing them. Homogeneity is the result of a prescription rather than a description. In fact, the states’ populations are fragmented, and transnational solidarity is a common reality.

Thus, researchers often claim that transnationalism is challenging the sovereignty and power of nation states (Robinson 1998). The study of migration and diaspora has demonstrated pluralization effects (Giordano 2010), and studies in international relations have illustrated the power of transnational actors (Haynes 2009). While governments defend borders as clear markers of their territory, sovereignty and power, these borders do not exclude exchange in many fields like economy, ideas, culture, persons and goods. Although nation states define their sovereignty by controlling all kinds of exchange, in some cases the
transborder flows escape the control of state authorities. Both ‘territorial states and non-state actors now operate in a world in which state boundaries have become culturally and economically permeable to decisions and flows emanating from networks of power not captured by singularly territorial representations of space’ (Agnew 1994, p. 72).

Accordingly, some of the most relevant topics in the study of religion and politics, such as church-state relations, minority politics and nationalism, are in danger of reproducing what has been criticized as an idealization of national authorities, referred to in geography as the ‘territorial trap’ (Agnew 1994), or in social sciences as ‘methodological nationalism’ (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). In his introduction to religion and politics, for example, the political scientist Jonathan Fox provided a comprehensive overview of theories on religion and politics (2013, 2018). However, the transnational character of religion is not part of the analysis. The perspective is of the nation state. This fits his ‘religion and the state’ project in which he assembles and compares national data from all over the world. In contrast, some studies on transnationalism neglect the national dimension (e.g. Juergensmeyer 2006).

Although some think of the nation as being primordial, and nations like Israel pre-existed modern nations, the majority of scholars speak about nations—or at least nation states—as a modern phenomenon. In the 19th century, the area under consideration here was part of the Russian Empire but was also touched by the Ottoman and Persian empires. The nationalist movements in the South Caucasus had much in common with those of Western Europe. They marked the transition from an empire to a republic and led to independent states in the South Caucasus between 1918 and 1921, after the Russian revolutions. The state-building process, however, was still incomplete when Bolshevik troops forced these republics to join the Soviet Union in 1921/22. Nevertheless, these states remained in the cultural memory and were frequently a point of reference during the state-building processes that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

South Caucasian nationalism in the 1990s was different. Some scholars use the terms ‘ethnic’ or ‘ethno-religious’ nationalism to emphasize the contrast with ‘civic’ nationalism. However, these terms do not fit the situation in the South Caucasus (Jones 2006; Metreveli 2016). Although nationalist ideas affect religious groups strongly in this region, this is not the kind of ‘religious nationalism’ described by Juergensmeyer (1994) or Friedland (2016). The political experience in the South Caucasus was the process of state-building. In the years after 1991, people were facing collapse, disorder and instability. An independent nation was their vision to escape these experiences. While nationalism in the late Soviet period was suspected to be (and finally was) accompanied by the request for independence (Johnston 1993), nationalism in the independent states of the 1990s stood for political order and the territorial integrity of sovereign states. This ‘hybrid nationalism’ (Metreveli 2016) of emerging states included civic, ethnic and religious elements and changed its form and character several times (Sabanadze 2010).

Case studies from the South Caucasus

The establishment of both national borders and the state as a political community was the historical frame in which religious groups established their own political agenda between 1991 and today. Today, each of the three independent countries—Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia—has a religious majority. In all three countries, nationalist discourses refer to this fact and bring religious minorities under pressure. Nevertheless, the ties of the majority to people outside the country has been one reason why the relationship between religion and nationalism has developed along different paths in each of the three countries.
Georgia

In Georgia, the dominant religious body is the GOC. Under Soviet rule, the GOC faced persecution and shrank to a weak institution. Most important for its instauration was Ilia II, elected Patriarch in 1977. In this time, the Soviet authorities cautiously cooperated with the GOC in order to control religious activities in the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. Nevertheless, the GOC remained a place for oppositional subcultures (Johnston 1993).

The rising nationalism in the 1980s was a major factor in the late Soviet Union. Ilia II succeeded in fusing the then secular nationalist movement with the Church (Jawad and Reisner 2013). In particular, the canonization of Ilia Chavchavadze in 1987 marked a turning point in the development of the Church. Chavchavadze had been one of the main proponents of a sovereign Georgian state and the nationalism of the late 19th century. However, the religious aspect of his nationalist ideas was ambiguous. On the one hand, he formulated the famous triplet ‘fatherland, language, faith’ as a formula for Georgian identity (Fuchslocher 2010)—encompassing religion as one aspect of Georgian nationalism. On the other, he included Muslim Adjara—which only tenuously belonged to Georgia—into his concept of nationalism and, thereby, developed a civic programme of religious tolerance (Reisner 2000).

Compared with Georgian nationalism in the late 19th century, which emerged from the decline of the Russian monarchy, Georgian nationalism in the 1980s revolved around the issue of national independence. In parallel to the strong ethnic nationalism of independent Georgia’s first president, Zviad Gamsachurdia, the GOC developed a moderate ethno-nationalist ideology (Chelidze 2014). Nevertheless, this ideology came under criticism among Georgian intellectuals during the Saakashvili government from 2003 to 2012. With ‘their declared aspirations towards the European model of a civic nation endorsing diversity and universal citizenship’ (Agadjanian 2015, p. 25), they criticized the Church’s ethno-religious nationalism. In the perspective of modernization, the GOC represented conservatism, anti-modernism and anti-democratic values (Zedania 2011). Furthermore, the Church’s anti-Western nationalism sometimes coincided with tendencies of the Russian Orthodox Church and was ‘a resource used by various forces that wish to restore relations between’ Russia and Georgia (Serrano 2014, p. 87).

The historically based—but ambivalent—relationship with Russia is a key to understanding the GOC’s nationalism and its contribution to state-building. The GOC belongs to the Orthodox commonwealth, of which the Russian Orthodox Church has claimed leadership since the fall of Constantinople in 1453. In the aftermath of Russia’s conquest of Georgia in 1811, the GOC lost its institutional independence and became incorporated into the Russian Orthodox Church. In 1917, after the collapse of Tsarist Russia, clerics in Georgia immediately re-established the Church’s autocephaly even before the political bodies were able to declare an independent state. The Russian Orthodox Church only accepted this renewed autonomy in 1943 when World War II demanded maximum support for the Soviet Union’s forces. This institutional history of defeat, self-assertion and rapprochement remains in the GOC’s cultural memory. The assertion of independence from its bigger brother to the north, together with ongoing dependencies, persists in both the religious and the political field.

From 1991 onwards, the Church supported both transnational ties with Russia and the Georgian claim for a sovereign nation. The GOC maintained a relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church even in a time when Georgia was solidifying its stance as a Western-oriented country with strong ambitions towards economic modernization. Thus, the GOC represented social conservatism and continuity. The Church’s own new
autonomy only partly overlapped with the dawn of the new Georgian state, realized in the form of drastic socio-political change towards a modern economy (Gavashelishvili 2012). This led to the polarization of the Georgian political elite (Serrano 2014).

Obviously, religiously framed nationalism was problematic for many religious minorities (Aydingün 2013). They face typical problems such as structural discrimination and unresolved claims for the restoration of property. However, minorities found strong supporters among liberal Georgian citizens who advocated for a pluralistic society. In addition to smaller minorities, two Muslim minorities inhabit the regions of Adjara and Kvemo Kartli. Adjara is close to the Turkish border and is inhabited by a Sunni majority. Georgian nationalism fostered a climate where many Adjarians felt pushed to conversion to Orthodox Christianity (Popovaite 2014). Kvemo Kartli is close to the Azerbajiani border and is inhabited predominantly by Shia Muslims; they maintain cultural relations with the inhabitants of Azerbaijan and are a target of the state’s incentive programmes, for example regarding access to higher education. In regard to both regions, the religiously related countries, Turkey in Adjara and Iran in Kvemo Kartli, invoke their relation to these religious minorities in their diplomatic negotiations with Georgia. In addition, Iran has started to offer stipends and programmes of financial support for studying in Iran. Nevertheless, the religiously motivated Shiite influence has remained weak compared with the economic attractiveness of Turkey (Gapedava and Turmanidze 2018).

Armenia

The state-building process in Armenia, its nationalism and the inclusion of religion in the emerging social order has happened against a different historical and geopolitical background. The dominant Armenian Apostolic Church is a non-Chalcedonian church, having separated from the Orthodox Church’s communion in the 6th century, like other Oriental Orthodox churches. Its theological distance from the Russian Orthodox Church and the shifting political domination helped the Church to survive during the Russian empire (Jones 1989, p. 173). However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Church has persisted with only with very few resources.

Complementary to the Georgian situation, the politics of independent Armenia depend strongly on Russia in the energy and security sectors. Furthermore, remittances from labour migrants account for a considerable part of Armenia’s economy. This Russian influence has prevented Armenia from seriously adopting a Western economy. Consequently, the Church has re-established its structures and properties in the shadow of an economy of patronage. The widespread narrative of the Armenian Apostolic Church’s inseparable connection with Armenian-ness has supported the religious aspect of Armenian nationalism and resulted in political privileges (Siekierski 2014).

Nevertheless, the political development in Armenia depends heavily on the powerful and well-organized Armenian diaspora all over the world. These transnational diaspora groups supported different political options for the Armenian homeland, in particular during Soviet times (Panossian 1998). This transnationalism through the diaspora corresponds to transnationalism in the Church’s structure. The Holy See of Etchmiadzin, situated close to today’s Armenian capital, is latently at odds with the second important Holy See of Cilicia, situated in Antalya/Lebanon (Hovhannisyan 2014).

Beyond the ethno-religious narrative of Armenian-ness, a substantial political discourse about pluralism and Western values accompanied the Armenian process of state-building. Compared with Georgia, the pro-Western (and anti-Soviet) discourse was weaker in Armenia.
Nevertheless, Armenia fostered religious pluralism and enacted laws to that effect. The implicit contradictions inherent in the religious aspects of Armenian-ness did not rise to the level of social polarization, as was the case in Georgia.

One example of a religious minority is Armenian Yezidism. Yezidis have inhabited some regions of the contemporary Armenian territory since the 12th century, but mainly arrived as refugees from the Ottoman Empire in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Japharova 2007). In the terminology of Armenian religious policy, they are classified as a ‘traditional religion,’ which equips them with more rights and some social recognition. Nevertheless, the description of Armenian Yezidis as a distinct religious group is problematic. Ethnically speaking, most Yezidis are Kurds with strong relations to Kurds in Anatolia and Iraq. It was during the process of nation-building that Armenian Yezidis were split into rival groups over the question of how to create a sense of ethnic belonging to ‘Kurds’ (Dalalyan 2011). Those groups who prefer the religious designation ‘Yezidi’ over their ethnic designation ‘Kurd’ seem to be the more assertive group. They accept cooperation with the Armenian state, limit their transnational relations and include themselves in the national Armenian minority policy, ensuring much better living conditions compared to Yezidis in Anatolia, Syria and Iraq (Evoyan and Manukyan 2018).

Azerbaijan

In Azerbaijan, religion was weak in the 1990s. The discourse on state-building remained secular and reactivated the historic memory of early 20th-century secular nationalism, to which a generation of liberal Muslim intelligentsia contributed a great deal (Świętochowski 1985). Similar to the early 20th century, for the majority of political elites, Islam was a cultural identity marker rather than a specific theological system. The long-time president Heydar Aliyev, who was the first to establish a new and stable political order, belonged to the former Soviet political elite. National discourses in the 1990s arose around the question of territorial integrity because of the Nagorno-Karabakh war (Motika 2009; Yemelianova 2014). Consequently, support for the government’s policy in the Karabakh issue was one of the most important ways that religious groups could prove their patriotism.

Defining Azerbaijan’s dominant religious group is more difficult than in Georgia and Armenia since neither Shia nor Sunni Islam developed overarching institutions. The new Azerbaijani state inherited from the Soviet Union a religious institution that was expected to represent all Muslims: the Spiritual Administration of the Caucasus Muslims (today, after several name changes: Caucasus Muslim Board [CMB]). The CMB suffered from ambivalent support from grassroots religious groups in the region. As a quasi-governmental institution, it was dependent on the state. Nevertheless, the charismatic leader Sheikh ul-Islam Allahshukur Pashazade made the CMB an important and powerful institution. He succeeded in balancing national and transnational religious challenges. First, with regard to the territorial question, he supported the national quest for territorial integrity and thus proved his national loyalty. The CMB’s nationalism in this respect was supportive but not a driving force. Pashazade acted as a diplomat and arranged bilateral talks about the Karabakh issue (although without a significant outcome). Second, Pashazade maintained good relations with Iran. The transnational religious connection was the basis for Iran’s engagement in the new country of Azerbaijan, but it was also the reason for Azerbaijani secular nationalism against Iran. From the perspective of Azerbaijan, Iran did not support Azerbaijan sufficiently in the Nagorno-Karabakh war. Overall, the CMB, under the leadership of Pashazade, balanced transnational diplomatic and religious ties with nationalist elements of loyalty to the government.
This particular situation has been the backdrop for both the nationalist and transnational aspects of religious minorities in the region. State-building in the early 1990s introduced a liberal law on religion that allowed religious groups to establish basic structures. The most pertinent development of religious minorities happened in Islamic groups through support from foreign countries. Firstly, Gülenists and Diyanet-sponsored groups linked to Turkey were active in Azerbaijan. In accordance with Azerbaijan’s good bilateral relations with Turkey, the state did not impede these groups until Erdoğan forced Azerbaijan to close down Gülenist institutions in 2016 (Balci 2017). In addition to Turkish groups, Salafist and Shia groups received funding from Salafist networks and Iran. All these groups created a new kind of religiosity (Jödicke 2017). In contrast to both the diffuse, syncretistic and, sometimes, peculiar folk religiosity on the one hand, and the official religious bureaucracy on the other, these groups fostered a distinct religiosity more strongly related to the idea of ‘great traditions’ (Redfield 1955).

During the state-building of the early 1990s, these religious groups developed their structures. They contributed to state-building by providing an alternative to the de facto established but still weak republic. Some Shia groups supported—with a historical and demographic argument on their side—a political order close to (or in accordance with) the Iranian political system. During the chaotic time in the early years of the republic, the government needed humanitarian aid, for which these groups were able to mobilize abroad. For example, Iran provided significant humanitarian aid for internally displaced persons from the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

The situation of these religious minorities changed in the 21st century. The more the political system developed and stabilized, the more these groups eventually became marginalized. Their political marginalization went hand in hand with their growing oppositional role. During the 2000s, one of the most discussed controversies over religion was between the state institutions that increasingly tried to control these religious groups, on the one side, and a Shia leader, Haji Ilgar Ibrahimoglu, who claimed religious freedom and advocated for human rights (Bedford 2008), on the other. This unusual positioning was typical for Islamic minority groups that oscillated between national political contributions and a transnational orientation. Many of these groups faced discrimination, and it can be difficult to precisely determine their position between loyalty to the state, opposition, revolutionary thought and terrorism (as it is called by the state officials). For the last ten years, the state’s power has grown, and its methods of control have become fully functional. The state has succeeded in integrating some major groups into the state-controlled religious bodies supervised by the CMB (Jödicke 2017). Recent developments show an even stronger state-controlled administration of religion that cuts off all financial and many ideological transnational connections. Due to the authoritarian political developments and highly controlled society, these minorities can only survive when balancing their transnational connections with national identifications.

Conclusion

Since independence in 1991, the region of the South Caucasus has experienced fundamental structural change. The power vacuum that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union created the opportunity for state-building and nation-building processes. Thus, nationalism was a dominant theme in political discourses. Consequently, the policies of both governments and the dominant religious bodies included nationalist aspects. Nations, national governments and national politics are not losing relevance in this region. They are powerful units of political action and cultural imagination. These
nations’ cultural policies include religion, and religious groups are aware of their powerful standing in politics.

Nevertheless, the young nation states have developed their sovereignty against the backdrop of global dependencies. They are still under pressure from several factors: the global economy (especially the energy sector), security issues and conditions formulated by such players as the European Union, the United States, Russia, Turkey and Iran, that all seek influence in the region. Religious groups have intervened as transnational players in bilateral relations (Jödicke 2018) or developed ‘diaspora policies’ (King 1998) for their advantage. Thus, nationalism in this region is dependent on the societies’ and the religions’ transnational relations and global interconnections.

Overall, this chapter has demonstrated how religious groups both adjusted to and influenced the changing social order in various ways. Most of the religious groups in the South Caucasus adopted nationalism or at least some kind of patriotism. Simultaneously, they maintained transnational relations. There is no ‘natural’ or ‘structural’ connection between religious groups and nationalism. The dominant religious groups’ links with nationalism contributed to the emerging states. In contrast, the smaller groups were mostly concerned with survival. For both dominant religions and minorities, transnational relations were important resources.

Religion in the 21st century faces both national and transnational forces. In most cases, these forces are entangled rather than separate. It is the constellation of power, both national and transnational, that constrains the development, strength and social position of religious groups.

Key texts


References


