

Does God Really Matter?

National Identity and the Politics of Orthodox Churches in Serbia and Georgia

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This doctoral project looks at Serbia and Georgia, two former communist states culturally dominated by the Orthodox Christian tradition, from a comparative historical perspective. Focusing on the period since the collapse of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, the objective of this project is twofold: on a macro level, it attempts to explain why the longevity of political power on the part of religious institutions can be maintained in one post-communist society (Georgia) while being in a relative decline in another (Serbia); on a micro level, given similar historical roles of the two Orthodox Christian churches in the formation of their respective nationalisms prior to and during communist rule, why has the dominant role of the Orthodox Church been sustained in one case (Georgia) while being in relative decline (i.e., relegated to merely symbolic level) in the other (Serbia)? Through this comparative case study the project seeks to contribute to the ongoing secularization debate by critically reflecting on Jose Casanova 'differentiation thesis'¹ and David Martin's 'cultural defense thesis'².

¹ Jose Casanova defined 'differentiation' as "a process of functional differentiation and emancipation of the secular spheres—primarily the state, the economy, and science—from the religious sphere and the concomitant differentiation and specialization of religion within its own newly found religious sphere" (1994: 19; ; see also 2011)

² According to Martin's 'cultural defense' theory it is unlikely that religious institutions become less powerful in societies where religious and national identities have been intertwined historically, that is, in small nations (like Ireland or Poland) where religion has been the carrier of national identity against a foreign threat (Martin 1978; see also 2005).

The project will attempt to show that even in similar historical and cultural contexts and against identical religious backgrounds, one nationalist church can lose its influence over politics and withdraw from the secular domain and another cannot. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union the Georgian Orthodox Church has kept a strong hold on social, economic and scientific affairs and public education, which resulted in the maintenance of the church's political influence and control over the national identity question. On the other hand, the Serbian case could prove the opposite of Martin's assumptions. Despite the strong link between religion and national identity, institutional 'differentiation' and decline of political salience of the church in fact happened and the Serbian Orthodox Church became less powerful politically and maintained limited influence over the state. From an empirical perspective, on the other hand, the project will make a modest contribution to a better understanding of the culture-specific roles and political importance of religious institutions for the widely debated process of integrating the South-eastern European (former communist) states into the EU.

The project will gather primary data through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, all conducted by myself on site. The interviews will be conducted in four languages (Georgian, English, Serbian and Russian). I target three main groups in the two states: a) bishops, prominent priests, high officials of patriarchates, and religious minority community leaders; b) the representatives of non-governmental organizations and interest groups who focus on ethnic/religious minority rights, constitutional arrangements and church-state relations; and c) expert interviews. In addition to the interviews with selected groups, the project will examine extensively the legal framework and constitutional basis of church-state relations and official documents of the church and annual sermons of patriarchs.