

Georgia in-between: religion in public schools

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Based on ethnographic fieldwork in a Georgian village and supplemented by a range of interviews and observations from different parts of Georgia, this paper explores the creative presence of religion in public schools. In 2005 and in line with the strong secularization and modernization discourse, the Georgian parliament passed a new law on education, restricting the teaching of religion in public schools and separating religious organizations and public schools; nevertheless, mainstream Orthodox Christianity is widely practiced in schools. The paper aims to show how Georgians use religious spaces in secular institutions to practice their identity, to perform being “true Georgians.” At the same time, they are adopting a strong secularization and modernization discourse. By doing so they create a new space, a third space, marked by in-betweenness. The study uses the theoretical lens of Thirdspace for analyzing the hybridity, the in-betweenness of practices and attitudes inherent for politics, religion, and everyday life of Georgians.

Keywords: religion; Thirdspace; hybridity; Georgia; Caucasus

Introduction

In 2005, the Georgian parliament passed a new Law on General Education, restricting the teaching of religion, the use of religious symbols in the school space for devotional purposes, as well as forbidding indoctrination and proselytism in public schools. The law still allows for the celebration of national holidays and historical dates, the organization of events aimed at fostering national and human values, as well as teaching the history of religions as an elective ([Law of Georgia on General Education](#), chapter 13.2). The changes indirectly addressed the issue of the institutional independence of public schools from the growing influence of the Georgian Orthodox Church. In general, the state expected public schools to stay independent from the dominant Georgian Orthodox Church and to treat every religious denomination in the same manner. This law is in line with the strong secularization and modernization discourse of the new Georgian government after the Rose Revolution in 2003, at least initially. At the time of its introduction, the general public presence of the Georgian Orthodox Church was increasing. Its growing influence was reflected and solidified in a law regarding general education adopted in 1997 under the Shevardnadze government.¹ It enabled the Georgian Orthodox Church to be actively involved in education. Later on, the importance of the church became even more reinforced when the constitutional agreement or the so-called Concordat between the state and the church was legalized in 2002. The high presence of traditional religion in public institutions

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became a problem for human rights, as it was connected with indoctrination and proselytism.

“We would start every day with *Our Father*, the Georgian lessons were especially full of prayers,” recalls one of the students from Tbilisi about her time in public school in 2003. It led to a further alienation of several ethnic and religious minorities not really integrated during Soviet times either: “In my school they started to teach us Orthodox Christianity and that’s when I realized I was a Muslim. I had never thought about it,” remembers Musaip, another former student from a public school in Tbilisi, now 20 years old, about his classes in 2004.

The changes of 2005 came as a blow. As one of the students remembers, the teacher for Georgian literature advised after the changes had been announced: “We cannot pray together any more but pray silently in your heart.” The word the teacher used was *gulshi* (in the heart). This is one of the ways in which the relocation of religiosity took place: to the heart, to a “camouflaged” space, and to a “camouflaged” time (Certeau 1984).

In the years to follow, some creative responses to the imposed restrictions emerged while facing the ever-increasing influence of the Georgian Orthodox Church on public life. Studies show how the space is still marked by the strong religious presence of dominant Orthodox Christianity in many schools (EMC 2014). It remains a front-stage matter for school principals to display their personal religious affiliation and that of the entire school. For this purpose, many of the schools use alternative spaces such as digital representations of the schools on Facebook and the like. Many of the schools conduct religious pilgrimages, openly invite religious authorities from the Georgian Orthodox Church to participate in events, and let them perform blessing rituals for the schools after or prior to schooltime, thus maneuvering around restrictions. At the same time, topics regarding autonomous citizenship, the “changing times” and “new demands,” and “being European” pervade the discourse among the youth, which in turn is the most religious and church-going group according to recent studies (Sumbadze 2012).

My paper aims to show how the younger generation of Georgians carries out being “true Georgians,” at the same time adapting a modernization discourse, and how by doing so they create a new space, a third space, marked by in-betweenness (Bhabha 2012; Soja 1996). This paper looks at lived religion in a space, which has been deliberately designated as a secular space; furthermore, it looks at identity as practiced (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). Looking at the school as a lived space, the paper asks how religiosity, or secularity for that matter, is practiced in the everyday life of the schools 11 years after the adoption of the law, and how contested identities are negotiated. In exploring in-betweenness, this study also aims to show how the official discourse about secularization and modernity often dwells on the same religious symbolism as the discourse of those who think to oppose this discourse. The idea of a secular state takes a specific form, not in line with the Western European tradition. This study shows once again the importance of studying religions in context, as products of particular histories and meanings (Asad 1993).

This paper uses the conceptual lens of the “Thirdspace” as theorized by Edward W. Soja to capture the complex reality as experienced during debates about traditions and modernity, religion, and secularism (Soja 1996). My appropriation of the spatial metaphor of Thirdspace utilizes this concept as an interpretive tool to analyze dynamic changes. This theoretical lens allows for movement beyond dichotomies by capturing some aspects of fluidity.

Thirdspace as a “lived space” (Lefebvre 1991) is a wide and open concept, which can encompass “otherness” as in “heterotopia” (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986, 22–27), resistance, and hybridity (Bhabha 1990, 2012). It can describe a space which is constantly