

The Georgian Orthodox Church: Corruption and Renewal

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In the summer of 1974 Keston College received some long and detailed documents which described a state of deep corruption in the Georgian Orthodox Church, and also the beginnings of a movement for purification and renewal. The charges against the Church's highest officers were so serious that it was felt at Keston that, despite the intricate detail and many other factors indicating the documents' authenticity, final judgment should be delayed until enquiries could be made and time had produced documentary and other confirmation—or the contrary.

Now, a year later, more than enough confirmation is available. In all, some 20 *samizdat* documents have arrived by various routes from Georgia, about half of them directly concerned with the church situation, and others partially so.¹ Articles by outsiders, analysing them, have begun to appear.²

But first some history. Today Georgia is one of the Soviet Union's 15 republics, with a population of less than five million, yet its statehood and Christianity are much older than Russia's. Georgia was converted in the early fourth century. Two centuries later its Church gained autonomy from the Patriarch of Antioch and in the eighth century autocephaly. Politically, after many centuries of rule or domination by Persians, Byzantians, Arabs, Seljuk Turks, Mongols, Ottomans and again Persians, with occasional periods of independence, Georgia became part of Russia in the first years of the nineteenth century. As a result, the Church lost its autocephaly in 1811, and vigorous russification began: Church Slavonic was made compulsory in the churches, and Georgian was banned. Only in March 1917, when the tsarist order collapsed, was the autocephaly restored (though the Russian Church did not recognize this until 1943), and between 1918 to 1921 it was reinforced by Georgia's brief independence.

When the Bolsheviks annexed the country in 1921 the Church was prominent among the resisters and suffered savage persecution. Today, out of nearly 2,500 Orthodox churches open before 1917 only 40 remain in operation (plus a few which belong to the Russian Church). This decline is much more drastic than in the Russian Church, where the equivalent figures are about 54,000 and 7,500, i.e., one in seven churches surviv-

ing, as contrasted to one in 60. But this fact did not prevent the Georgian Church from, in 1962, joining the World Council of Churches.

From the mid-1950's until 1972 political life in Georgia was relatively calm and uneventful. Then a drive against corruption began, and among the first victims were two of the republic's top communists, Party First Secretary Mzhavanadze and a fellow secretary, Nikolai Tskhakaya. The new First Secretary was Eduard Shevardnadze, a man with a KGB background, who proceeded to arrest some of the leaders of the Mafia-like formation which had long wielded enormous power and influence in Georgia. He evidently had to tread cautiously, though, as several attempts appear to have been made on his life, and on 9 May, 1973, the Opera House in Tbilisi, Georgia's capital, was burnt to the ground by arsonists. Nonetheless, while touching very few of those in high positions, by late 1974 he had, in two years, reportedly arrested 25,000 people on corruption charges. 9,500 of these belonged to the Party, 7,000 to the Komsomol and 70 to police agencies, including the KGB.³ These figures lend substance to an official writer's report that the Party had been implementing a resolution "On the Struggle against Job Protectionism in the Republic", and removing people from their jobs so as "to make the moral-political climate more healthy".⁴

In early 1975 Shevardnadze's "deputy", Second Secretary A. N. Churkin, was implicated in one of the corruption cases, and in April disgraced and dismissed. This may indicate that Shevardnadze has been making progress at the higher levels, but until he removes the long established top men in the KGB, the MVD and the Procuracy he can hardly hope to have made a lasting break-through. The reasons for this will become clearer in what follows.⁵

It was, of course, coincidental that Patriarch Efrem II should die in April 1972, just when the police drive against corruption was beginning. But certainly his death triggered off the most spectacular of the acts of corruption in his Church, and equally certainly the new climate made the initial investigation of them much more possible than it would have been otherwise. In any case, by 19 March, 1973, a senior Procuracy investigator, David Koridze, had accumulated enough evidence about them to write a long report "On the Crimes Committed in the Patriarchate of Georgia," which he sent to the Central Committee of the Party. This document, condensed here to about half its full length of 12 pages, now presents the main outlines of the story up to the time of its writing :

The Procurator's Office of the Kirov district of Tbilisi is currently processing the materials of an investigation into the state of affairs in the Georgian Christian Orthodox Church and the Patriarchate.

The investigation was initiated as a result of numerous complaints and warnings from Christian believers; these indicated the serious condition of the Georgian Christian Church, which is now on the way to complete degeneration, and also the fact that a large quantity of valuable church property has been stolen from the Patriarchate: icons, crosses, library books, money, pictures, chalices and other objects. Among these are valuable objects, of historic significance, which have been preserved over the centuries as national treasures.

During the investigation a large number of people were interrogated, including both clergy and ordinary believers who are interested in the fate of the Georgian Church. In addition, a number of documents containing decisive evidence were obtained.

According to statements made by those mentioned above, after the death of the Catholicos and Patriarch of All Georgia, Efrem II, and the accession of David V—Khariton Dzhibraclovich Devdariani—in his place, the Georgian Church began to slide towards moral disintegration and degeneration; for instance, the new Patriarch restored to a number of churches persons who had previously been expelled from the clergy for corruption, immoral living, drunkenness and other criminal acts. These persons are now continuing to behave in a manner unworthy of servants of the Church.

The services and singing in churches are mainly in Russian, a fact which indicates an attempt to deprive the Georgian Church of its independence and to subordinate it once more to the Russian Orthodox Church.

Priests systematically violate the rules of the priesthood: they conduct the mass, christenings, weddings and other religious rituals in shortened forms; they take more money from the people for such services than is laid down. Some of them pass the night on the church premises, occupying themselves with debauchery and drunkenness.

Here Koridze cites examples, including an incident in which Devdariani, when still a parish priest, told a parishioner: "You can't save the souls of your departed ones for ten kopeks" (five pence at the official exchange-rate), and ordered that such impecunious people should henceforth not be allowed into the church. The parishioner was a woman of 55, in bad health and with a monthly pension of only 21 roubles (£12). Koridze continues:

This state of affairs has led to a situation where a proportion of the believers have stopped going to church and have started to pray in specially created sects.

The Catholicos and Patriarch David himself, in spite of the words in the Church canons (article 20) that 'a candidate for the post of Catholicos must have had an ordinary higher education and also the necessary training in theology', has no educational qualifications from either the State or the Church; until he entered the Church he used to sell meat-pies on the Khashuri railway-station. His appointment to the post of Catholicos and Patriarch took place in illegal circumstances.

Efrem II, while he was still alive, in personal conversations with believers and also in public speeches, always used to state that the only person who should replace him was Metropolitan Ilya Shiolashvili. The latter has a higher secular and theological education, and he also knows several foreign languages; he is

young and commands great authority and respect among believers, both in our country and abroad.

A short time before his death, Efrem II made his will, in which he proposed Ilya Shiolashvili to the Synod as candidate for the post of Catholicos and Patriarch of All Georgia. This will was destroyed by Khariton Devdariani and his supporters, and replaced by a new, forged will, in which Devdariani was proposed as candidate. It was this will that was considered by the Synod.

According to the Church canons, all Metropolitans and Bishops are considered members of the Synod, moreover, should any of these be absent, the Synod is not empowered to take any decisions.

At the moment of Efrem II's death there were two Metropolitans in Georgia: Ilya Shiolashvili and Khariton Devdariani, and the bishops were: Romanoz Petriashvili, Bidzina Keratishvili and Zinovy Mazhuga (rector of the Church of Alexander Nevsky).

Two hours after Efrem II's death a meeting of the Synod was summoned by Khariton Devdariani. Such an urgent summoning of the Synod was motivated by nothing but the desire to declare Khariton Devdariani candidate for the post of Catholicos as quickly as possible. The aim of this was to ensure that no one would propose Ilya Shiolashvili at the Synod meeting.

Metropolitan Ilya Shiolashvili and Bishop Romanoz Petriashvili were deliberately not invited to the Synod meeting; this was inadmissible.

Thus, on the chosen day the Synod meeting called to 'elect' the Catholicos of Georgia comprised the following persons: Khariton Devdariani, Bidzina Keratishvili and Zinovy Mazhuga. Also present at the meeting in a consultative capacity was one Ilya Cheishvili, representing D. Shalutashvili, the commissioner for religious affairs . . . All this was a crude violation of the Church canons, as Khariton Devdariani could not vote for his own candidacy, and this left only two 'electors' with voting rights.

The official record of the meeting, as it turned out, was later signed under compulsion by Bishop Romanoz Petriashvili, who was not present at the meeting; for this service the impostor-candidate for the post of Catholicos, David, elevated Zinovy Mazhuga and Romanoz Petriashvili to the rank of Metropolitan, which he had no right to do, as he had not yet been elected Catholicos by a council of the Church.

The Patriarchate was officially asked by me for the record of the Synod meeting on 7 April, 1972, so that it could be attached to the case, but the document was not produced. Patriarch David V, in a personally signed reply, communicated the following: 'I am unable to produce for you the record of the Synod meeting, as the original record, together with other documents, has been stolen from the Patriarchal chancellery and we no longer possess it. . . .'

It is noteworthy that at the Church council, according to the rules, the seminarists should have been present for the election of the Catholicos and Patriarch. However, David, with the support of commissioner D. Shalutashvili, did not allow this, as the seminarists were against his candidature and supported Ilya Shiolashvili.

Here Koridze describes the close relations between commissioner Shalutashvili and the lawyer Ilya Cheishvili, who had earlier served a camp sentence for bribery and then, with Shalutashvili's help, got a nominal

but paid job as a legal consultant to the Patriarchate. In 1971, however, Efrem II had had him dismissed. Thus he was present at the Synod meeting of April 1972 “even though he no longer had any relation to the Church”. On Efrem’s death David V had Cheishvili reappointed.

Koridze gives details of the priests most closely associated with David V—Pakhom Oboladze, Terziyev, and Georgy Chachua (now deceased)—and reports that “among believers they have been well-known as drunkards and debauchees”. The first two “took an active part” in the robbing of the Patriarchate.

However, “of those with a shady past who have managed to install themselves in the Church, it is the present Bishop Gaioz of Sion Cathedral, head of the Tsilkanskaya diocese, who merits the greatest attention”. This man, whose lay name is Bidzina Keratishvili (see above), was born in 1945. In 1964 he was expelled from Tbilisi University, the real reason being, “according to the statements of many people”, that he was “a practiser of passive homosexuality”. In 1969 he was sentenced for “hooliganism”, and soon after this he entered the seminary. Almost at once he “was expelled for pushing drugs”. He got himself a secretarial job in the Patriarchate.

It is not yet known how he managed to inspire such trust in Efrem II, but in 1971 Efrem made him a monk, and in December of the same year ordained him deacon and then priest. On 26 March, 1972, despite his serious illness, Efrem rose from his bed and personally elevated him to the rank of bishop. After this Keratishvili became the boss of the Georgian Patriarchate, because from the end of 1971 Efrem was bed-ridden and could not conduct any business.

The Rector of the Mtskheta theological seminary until the death of Efrem II was Metropolitan I. Shiolashvili, but he was then forced to leave the seminary and sent to work in the Abkhazia diocese. The rector of the seminary is now considered to be Khariton Devdariani, a man with no theological education.

From the evidence of the persons interrogated it is clear that instruction at the seminary is on a very low level. Devdariani has dismissed from it first and foremost those who have dared to say aloud that he was not worthy to become Catholicos and Patriarch of Georgia. It is known from the same evidence that the seminary classes are now concerned largely with how to conduct christenings and funerals and other rituals. The other subjects provided for in the programme, ones which would give the seminarists a general education, are not considered worthy of attention.

Here Koridze gives a detailed account of the robbing of the Patriarchate. “Stolen were not only the Patriarchate’s treasures, which are considered State property, but also objects belonging to Efrem II: his library, writings, and a large sum of money.” Prior to this, one treasure had disappeared, and so the Synod had decided to make an inventory and Metropolitan Shiolashvili had had seals put on a safe and several rooms. “How-

ever, Keratishvili managed to persuade Efrem II to have the seals removed."

Koridze reports that "how much B. Keratishvili took from the Patriarchate, and where to, has not been established". But prior to working in the Patriarchate he lived in poverty, and after Efrem's death he bought a luxurious flat at No. 7 Chorokhi St. for 10,000 roubles. Also, David V now uses four different and expensive cars, at least three of which were acquired after Efrem's illness became serious and Keratishvili assumed his power. Koridze gives details of these various episodes.

He also describes how David V transferred the priest Guliashvili from an important to a provincial church because he "was not a supporter of David and did not recognize him as Patriarch of Georgia". He filled the vacated post with Georgy Kalasovsky, "who had been disbarred by Efrem II for debauchery and other evil deeds".

Koridze now shifts his attention to underlying causes.

Interrogated witnesses have given identical evidence that all the offences committed, from the robbing of the Patriarchate and the illegal appointment of David, to the illegalities still being committed today, were and are being carried out with the knowledge and assistance of commissioner for church affairs, D. Shalutashvili, for which help he has received from Cheishvili many bribes in money and presents.

According to unofficial evidence, the involvement of certain officials of the KGB has had an influence on the events which have occurred.

Before the death of Efrem II KGB officials came to Sion Cathedral and, in a conversation with the priest Pakhom Oboladze, said that all measures must be taken to ensure that I. Shiolashvili is not proposed as a candidate, and also that the new Catholicos and Patriarch must be David Devdariani.

Before the Patriarchal elections three KGB officials came to the Mtskheta theological seminary and categorically forbade the Rector, I. Shiolashvili, to allow even one seminarist to be present at the election. Bakhtadze, a KGB official, began to quarrel with church official Avtandil [also known as Illarion] Samkharadze when the latter expressed dissatisfaction with David's candidature. When Samkharadze wrote complaints to the Central Committee of the Georgian Communist Party, to the Council of Ministers and the Praesidium of the Supreme Soviet about the robbery of the Patriarchate and the fact that David was not worthy to become Patriarch, Bakhtadze summoned him to KGB headquarters and threatened him, and David removed him from the Patriarchate.

KGB department head Tvalchrelidze received, in connection with the events in the Patriarchate, a valuable present from the Patriarchate's treasures.

Koridze also describes how, with the help of a relative of Party secretary Tskhakaya, "Devdariani, Shalutashvili and their associates contacted the wife [Victoria Tyriskevich] of Mzhavanadze, First Secretary of the Communist Party of Georgia, and she helped them in certain ways and received valuable presents in return". Efrem's only brother, however,

Vladimir Sidamonidze, was unable to obtain any of Efrem's property. Koridze mentions here that Efrem's salary was 2,000 roubles per month.

Koridze ends his report by pointing to the efforts of Shalutashvili and others "to eliminate the traces of the robbery", and by making six recommendations as to : the prevention of further church robberies; the need to intensify the criminal investigation and look into Shalutashvili's apparent involvement; and the state of affairs at the Mtskheta seminary and in the Church generally. On the last point he feels it necessary "to examine the moral qualities and the past of church personnel, and then to embark on the expulsion from the Church of those who have no relation to the faith or to church services, and who do not serve God and the people, but serve for money and for their own pernicious ends".

Koridze's report must have been handled by a section of the Party's Central Committee which preferred a cover-up to an intensified investigation. For the outcome was silence, and when, after almost a year, the forces of revolt and reform renewed their efforts, the KGB went over to the counter-attack.

The renewed pressure was led—as regards the public record—by an historian, Teimuraz Dzhvarsheishvili of Tbilisi (Prospekt Tsereteli 79, flat 51). In early 1974 he wrote a long document entitled "Testimony", evidently for presentation to a "Christian court" which was due to sit in a church on 27 January and to hear evidence from "witnesses of the many evil deeds of Keratishvili". However, the latter and three KGB officials, Tvalchrelidze, Bakuradze and Bakhtadze, managed to intimidate some of the key witnesses into staying away, and no hearing was held. In a later post-script to his "Testimony" Dzhvarsheishvili describes how the same people then tried "to seek out and blackmail" the organizers of the hearing, and identified one of them as the priest Victor Shalamberidze, "a principle eye-witness of many of their crimes". Two weeks later, on 11 February, he "was involved in a car crash which occurred in suspicious circumstances, and died, together with members of his family".

In his "Testimony" Dzhvarsheishvili had included this priest in a list of 13 "key witnesses" whom "world public opinion must protect". The others are : I. Shiolashvili, A. Samkharadze, Guram Shalamberidze, Mtskheta priest Zurab Tskharadze, Tskhakaya monk Tsezar Ananiashvili, Sukhumi priest Vazha Dzhinoria, Ketevan Kiliptari of the Sion Cathedral, Gagi Moseshvili of Gudauta, Fr. Elgudzha and the priest Beruashvili of Sukhumi, Fr. Klimenty of the Motamet church, and Andrei Chakhuashvili of Kutaisi.

The author of "Testimony" writes in the name of a group of Chris-

tians who believe that a formal commission of priests and Church members should be constituted "to condemn the criminals". The latter are the same people as in Koridze's report, with a few extra names, and the charges, spelled out in great detail, are also the same in essence, if more numerous. Dzhvarsheishvili writes with passion and less legalistic circumspection than Koridze, but he tells the same story. He concludes, moreover: "As with the other witnesses I take full responsibility for every word of the above evidence. If anything should turn out to be incorrect I am ready to accept punishment for bearing false testimony."

The "Testimony" is much more critical than Koridze of Efrem II, putting more stress on the alleged homosexuality of his associates and providing details. Dzhvarsheishvili believes that Keratishvili achieved his aims principally by blackmailing Efrem and even threatening his life. He is a strong supporter of Shiolashvili and passionately opposed to "the usurper" David V, who, he says, at his enthronement privately promised the Russian Church that he would renounce the Georgian Church's autocephaly. He also reports the KGB's destruction of documents in the case, and its persistent and mostly successful intimidation not only of witnesses but also of Procuracy investigators.

On 14 March 1974 a "Group of Georgian Christians" confirmed this last point by writing that "the case is being investigated in the Kirov district procuracy, and also in the city procuracy, but radical measures are not being taken". This document has Koridze's and Dzhvarsheishvili's documents as appendices, and is in fact a forceful summary of them. It adds, however, that David V is now "old, feeble-minded and ill", so the Church is in fact being run by Keratishvili, "the most characteristic example of the 'red' clergy of Georgia".⁵

The KGB's counter-attack followed swiftly on the appearance of these documents in *samizdat*. On 23 March a 50-year-old conductor of three church choirs, Mrs. Valentina Pailodze, was arrested, and at Easter the police and the Komsomol harassed young church-goers in Tbilisi more severely than the previous year, detaining and interrogating them in large numbers.⁶ Pailodze's trial came quickly, in June, and although the charges concerned the anonymous writing of letters allegedly slandering the State, and also infringing citizens' rights by imposing religion on them, Pailodze declared her belief that the real KGB motive concerned her active part in the movement against Church corruption. This belief was highly plausible, as the case presented against her in court was clearly weak and falsified. Her sentence was one and a half years. In a letter from her camp to Party leader Shavardnadze she expounds the Church's dissenters' position, mentioning in passing that twice warrants were prepared for the arrest

of Keratishvili and Shalutashvili, but then annulled by Deputy-Procurator of Georgia O. Dzhibladze.⁷

On 7 October 1974 the KGB moved against Koridze also. An official asked him who had translated his report into Russian, and added that the KGB suspected Zviad Gamsakhurdia (a translator, member of the Writers' Union of Georgia, official of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Monuments, and son of the famous Georgian writer Konstantin Gamsakhurdia). Koridze replied that he had shown the report to Gamsakhurdia, but as it had also been read by "many officials of the Central Committee, the Council of Ministers and the Procuracy" one could draw no conclusions. He also expressed strong disapproval of the fact that the KGB was concerned with this, and not with investigating and punishing those guilty of robbing the Patriarchate. At this the official was silent.

In late October Koridze was summoned for interview by the head of the Georgian KGB, Alexei Inauri, and his deputy. They said that his report had been broadcast by foreign radio-stations and that a protest from the Pope was feared. Inauri threatened Koridze with expulsion from the Party and arrest, and rebuked him for having relations with "that anti-Sovietist Gamsakhurdia". Koridze replied that he had only performed his professional duty, that his report was not a secret document, and that he had no reason to suspect Gamsakhurdia of anti-Sovietism. He was then accused of having himself become "an anti-Sovietist" and "a believer", but dismissed the charges as ridiculous: he was the son of a worker and been a Party-member for 30 years.

Immediately after this, Koridze was forced into retirement at the age of 60, despite his protests that many Procuracy officials were well over 60. Early in 1975 his application to join the Collegium of Defence Lawyers was turned down after several months of delay, following a personal phone-call from Inauri to the Collegium. Koridze has the title of a Senior Counsellor of Justice, and had worked for 30 years as an "investigator of specially important cases".⁸

Thus, for the time being at least, the Georgian regime had closed ranks in defence of the church-police corruption. Yet the efforts of Koridze and the Church reformers appear to have already borne some fruit, in that they have seemingly acted as an important catalyst in the emergence of a human rights movement in Georgia. A large group of intellectuals sympathetic to Pailodze gathered outside her trial,⁹ and in 1974 an Initiative Group for the Defence of Human Rights was formed in Tbilisi. Its members were Gamsakhurdia, Merab Kostava (a music teacher and anthroposophist), Nikolai Samkharadze (a doctor), O. Tsikolia, and others.

One of their first actions was to send an appeal for Mrs. Pailodze to Prof. Igor Shafarevich, the well-known Moscow dissenter.¹⁰

If, then, activities like these should, despite all the obstacles, gain wider support, the movement for reform and renewal in the Georgian Orthodox Church may yet succeed.

¹ See documents in Radio Liberty's "Samizdat Archive" series, Nos. A.S. 1821 (3 documents), 1830, 1833, 1834, 1960, 1961 (4 documents), 2053, 2105, 2106, 2108, 2109 (2 documents), 2110, 2111; also the items (mostly summaries of the foregoing) in *A Chronicle of Current Events*, Nos. 32 (pp. 40-42, 72-73, 80-82, of the Russian ed., Khronika Press, New York), 34 (pp. 55-57, 67, 69), and also 27 (pp. 326-27 of English ed., Amnesty International, London).

² See *Russia Cristiana*, Milan, No. 141, 1975 (article by T. Tommasi), and *Moskovskii sbornik*, Moscow, No. 2, January 1975, as summarized in *A Chronicle of Current Events*, No. 35, 31 March, 1975.

³ *A Chronicle of Current Events*, No. 34, 31 December, 1974, Russian ed., p. 69.

⁴ T. Dzhafarli in *Sovetskaya kultura*, Moscow, 20 December, 1975.

⁵ (on p. 15) Another equally vivid illustration (not involving the Church) is the case of Karlo Tsulaya. See document AS 2110.

⁵ (on p. 21) This document is No. AS 1821, and Koridze's and the "Testimony" are AS 1821 a. and b.

⁶ See AS 1833 and also the paper *Tbilisi* (in Georgian), 15 April 1974.

⁷ On Pailodze and her trial see especially AS 1961 and *Chronicle* No. 34.

⁸ On these episodes see AS 2053 and *Chronicle* Nos. 34 and 35.

⁹ See *Chronicle* 34, p. 57 of Russian ed.

¹⁰ On this group and related events see *Chronicle* 34, pp. 80-82 of Russian ed., and AS Nos. 1960, 2105, 2106.

Keston College: Forthcoming Engagements

Director

- 30 Aug. Public Meeting in Penzance. Contact R. V. Spouse, Trebartha, Kewvean, Carbis Bay, St. Ives, Cornwall. Tel. St. Ives 7875.
- 31 Aug. Preaching at Alverton Free Church, Penzance.
- 1 Sept. Public Meeting at Truro Baptist Church.
- 7 Sept. 6.30 Preaching at Farnborough Parish Church, Kent.
- 16-20 Oct. Visit to Denmark ("Sakharov Hearing", Danish Parliament).

Alan Scarfe

- 21 Sept. Tonbridge School.
- 20 Oct. 8.00 St. George's, Harrow.