

Table of contents

- [Draft amendment to the Constitution threatens minority religions](#) - (20.12.2000)
- [Freedom of conscience or freedom of conflict?](#) - (17.10.2000)
- [After Jehovah Witnesses, MP Sharadze sights Muslim University](#) - (05.10.2000)
- [Court in Republic of Georgia convicts victims of mob attack on Jehovah's Witnesses](#) - (05.10.2000)
- [Orthodox mob tries to silence journalists about program against Jehovah's Witnesses](#) - (28.09.2000)
- [Police and Orthodox extremists join in beatings as convention site is looted and destroyed](#) - (17.09.2000)
- [Masked police bring violent halt to religious convention in Republic of Georgia](#) - (08.09.2000)
- [Violent attacks on Jehovah's Witnesses spread to western part of Republic of Georgia](#) - (09.09.2000)
- [European Parliament delegation condemns violence against Jehovah's Witnesses in Republic of Georgia](#) - (09.09.2000)
- [Facing up to intolerance in Georgia](#) - (07.09.2000)
- [Mob attacks journalists and Jehovah's Witnesses in Republic of Georgia courtroom](#) - (17.08.2000)
- [Georgian Parliament to draft law on religion](#) - (17.08.2000)
- [Baptists persecuted](#) - (21.08.2000)
- [Prosecution of victims of Gldani mob attack scheduled for August 16](#) - (15.08.2000)
- [Sharadze's supporters intensify violent attacks on Jehovah's Witnesses following court decision](#) - (03.08.2000)
- [Georgia's Jehovah's Witnesses to Challenge Court Decision on Revoked Registration](#) - (07.07.2000)
- [Jehovah's Witnesses to appeal Tbilisi district court's ruling against religious freedom](#) - (27.06.2000)

- [Gldani mob attack sanctioned : investigator charges victim with assault](#) - (10.06.2000)
- [Tbilisi court protects religious freedom](#) – (01.03.2000)

Draft amendment to the Constitution threatens minority religions

Orthodox Church to become a State Church

HRWF (20.12.2000)/ Website <http://www.hrwf.net> – Email info@hrwf.net – President Eduard Shevardnadze is about to sign a draft amendment to the constitution granting the Orthodox Church the status of State Church and paving the way to a concordat with the State. The draft amendment (*) does not contain any provision on possible agreements between the State and other religions.

The presidential signature will open the public debate on that issue which will last for one month. The parliament will then reexamine the draft amendment in the light of the proposals made during the public discussion and vote on the constitutional amendment.

Interviewed by *Human Rights Without Frontiers* in Tbilisi, Ms Elene Tevdoradze, chairman of the Parliamentary Committee for Human Rights, said : « I am opposed to such an amendment because it is discriminatory against non-Orthodox religions ». And she added « There are currently discussions about the possibility for historical religions to be recognized as institutions under public law but 'cults' will never be granted that status. »

Mr Zaza Gachechiladze, editor-in-chief of the *Georgian Times*, told *Human Rights Without Frontiers* « Georgia has been a full member of the Council of Europe since April 1999 and has ratified international covenants guaranteeing freedom of religion but Georgian society is not mature enough yet to accept religious pluralism and needs to be educated. Since the collapse of communism, a lot of people have become disoriented : many take refuge in old Orthodox values that are no longer compatible with modern society while others follow new religious movements .»

Under cover of anonymity, some Western European officials based in Tbilisi told *Human Rights Without Frontiers* that for the Orthodox Church the concordat is a weapon aimed at thwarting the activities of non-traditional religions in Georgia. A member of the Georgian Parliament who does not want to be named also said that Eduard Shevardnadze had converted to Orthodoxy and personally wanted the unique role of the Orthodox Church in the national history to be recognized and enshrined in the constitution.

Supporters of a secular state in Georgia feel that the separation between State and religions is threatened and call upon international organizations such as the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the European Parliament as well as the US State Department and the US Commission on International Religious Liberty to urgently put Georgia's religious policy under scrutiny.

« There are obvious signs that Georgian society is drifting to religious intolerance and violence with the tacit agreement of the political authorities and the law enforcement forces », said George Gogia, spokesperson of Human Rights Watch in Tbilisi. On 18 December, Father Vassili Mkalavishli, a fanatic defrocked priest, and his supporters demonstrated on the site of a building being constructed by a Pentecostal congregation in Tbilisi, shouting that it was a satanic place. On 19 December, the Vassilist militia intimidated two families of Jehovah's Witnesses by marching around their house where meetings were to be conducted.

In the last 15 months, Jehovah's Witnesses have been the targets of repeated violent attacks : disruption of assemblies, beatings, destruction of religious literature by fire, looting and arson of a meeting place. On 20 December the Supreme Court should release a decision on acts of violence perpetrated against two Jehovah's Witnesses. In August last, the Tianeti district police interrupted a Baptist religious service and destroyed pieces of furniture in the church.

(*) The original text of the draft amendment in the Georgian language is available at *Human Rights Without Frontiers*.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Freedom of conscience or freedom of conflict?

by Nodar Broladze

Nezavisimaia gazeta (17.10.2000) / HRWF International Secretariat (26.10.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Activity of religious extremists in Georgia is considered by the patriarchate as discrediting the Orthodox church.

The construction of civil society in Georgia with rigorously functioning rules of a "democratic community" seems not to inspire everybody. Moreover the Georgian public has been practically forced to observe with alarm phenomena that exceed contemporary social norms. The issue is something that amounts to local crusades. It is difficult to say anything different about the recent militant attack of a mad crowd upon the offices of the independent newspaper "Rezonansi," led by a citizen dressed in clerical garb.

The anger of the thugs was brought out by articles that condemned people who had a medieval frame of mind. This time the false clerics and their flocks reached such a frenzy that they welded shut the entrance to the editorial office and threatened its workers with violence and anathema.

The reporters' error was that they provided a thoroughly adequate assessment of the conduct of the aggressive fanatics who undertook the defense of the purity of Christian doctrine from "infringements" on the part of local adherents of the Jehovah's Witnesses. This religious organization with its numerous groups and affiliates was created with the

aid of representatives of foreign countries that operated in Georgia contrary to the interests of the defenders and zealots of Georgian Orthodoxy. The conflict that began several years ago has lasted until now and it has led the Jehovah's Witnesses into court. These trials have mostly been won by Jehovah's Witnesses because the decisions were made in accordance with specifics of existing legislation.

One of the suits filed for prohibiting Jehovahist activity in the country was recently approved, although the Jehovah's Witnesses, who have been activated by the intolerance of their opponents, are not about to surrender and they have taken countermeasures. However the question is not just about the legislative requirements, since a law on religion has still not been adopted and many judicial decisions are based on the provisions of the constitution. The situation gives direct evidence of the deficiency of the cultural views of that portion of society that somehow is trying to hinder the free development of democratic processes. Since it is not possible to suspect the patriarchate of sympathy for the Jehovahists and the law enforcement agencies have not taken sufficient measures against the hooligan priests, those who hate the Jehovahists and other "non-Christians" enjoy a certain support. It suffices to recall the two beaten youths who showed up in front of the courthouse after one of the judicial sessions.

The occasion for the bloody beating of sectarians was the conduct by the Jehovahists of a special meeting for accepting a number of citizens into their community. While the response of the extremists had a religious tinge, it also displayed characteristics of the political and social aspects of the past decade. No fewer than 100 persons, mostly women, attacked the headquarters of the Jehovahists. They were led by the former priest Fr Vasily, who four years earlier had broken with the patriarchate on the issue of ecumenism. But the point is that the issue of ecumenism has been abandoned by the holy father to the opponents of the patriarchate who are primarily Zviadists [followers of Zviad]. Father Vasily (secular name, Vasily Mkalavishvili) drove away priests who were appointed in the diocese, beat up the Orthodox clergy he did not like, and flagrantly ignored decrees of the Catholicos Patriarch of all Georgia, Ilia II. The group that supports Vasily has since been characterized by the adherence of most of its members to the former president Zviad Gamsakhurdia.

Father Vasily, who mixed his ministry with politicized events in defense of the ideas of the Zviadists, often was the focus of attention of society at large. In 1995 the Holy Synod deposed him from the clerical rank, after which he was an ordinary citizen. However, after he was removed from the church he continued to celebrate the liturgy under the open sky. He attempted to set himself up as an alternative spiritual leader of Orthodox Christians in one of the districts of the Georgian capital and to establish his influence against that of the patriarchate, and so he began organizing attacks on a district scale upon the meeting places of sectarians and Jehovahists. Since then loud summons have resounded, to destroy the "satanic forces" and to eliminate the nests of the heterodox. Sometimes they beat women severely and pulled their hair, but they also attacked the men. When they first attacked the Jehovahists the "holy father" assaulted several sect

members with a heavy cross. But people of his team were even more zealous. The pogroms became more thorough.

The culprits in the first outburst were arrested, but then they were released, including the former priest Vasily, from whom promises not to leave were elicited. However a signature on a document promising not to leave was no means of "reformation." And militant processions to teach a lesson to the Jehovahists and their involuntary "accomplices," who defended democratic liberties for the youth, continued, which evoked even greater agitation in public and nongovernmental organizations. A criminal case on the charge of hooliganism and damage to public buildings was initiated in the city police administration. However this only motivated the religious extremists to achieve new "feats." Unfortunately parliament delayed in the adoption of a law on religion, the need for which was often noted. There is no clear basis to make such disruptive actions clearly criminal or to establish the state's attitude toward one or another sect, and this situation encourages contemporary religious and political obscurantists.

Obviously the Orthodox church is not enthusiastic about the activity of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Georgia. And obviously this is not just a matter of different reading of religious texts nor attempts of one or another sectarian movement to interpret sacred scriptures. Nor is it just that the Orthodox church and the patriarchate are trying to block an independent approach to the study and acceptance of Christianity. Although all of this cannot but upset clerics. The Jehovahists, in the opinion of the church hierarchs, at every opportunity are trying to recruit into their ranks naive and unstable citizens and to lead them to renounce Orthodoxy. However this does not mean, according to representatives of the patriarchate, that the attacks of the religious extremists of Vasily Mkalavishvili's team could be approved in the least. The position of the Orthodox clergy is that by their outrageous, but criminal, actions the followers of Mkalavishvili are attempting to draw attention to themselves from the public and political circles and to promote themselves as the most active and consistent advocates of the triumph of Orthodoxy. In reality this promotes the disorientation of believers and the creation of a situation where religious associations are persecuted. Such an impression can produce an undesired effect. For example, it could evoke sympathy for the Jehovahists. The patriarchate sees a serious threat in the outburst of the extremists that discredits the Orthodox church. Many observers consider that "these people are a kind of pathological misanthropic sect that is much more fearsome than the Jehovahists or anybody else."

One cannot but note that the appearance of intolerance in such an aggressive form ten years ago characterized a portion of the followers of Zviadism. Zviad Gamsukhrdia served for a substantial portion of the population that was marginalized on the basis of a religious perspective, as a kind of compensation for their helplessness. And their current leaders resist integration into the international community and attempt to avoid the influence of western civilization and culture.

The overwhelming majority of people who support such views give a positive assessment of the actions of the makers of the pogrom. They enjoy the support of a small group of nationalistic deputies, who are nostalgic for the times when the country was ruled by

Zviad. It is obvious that such a development will not improve the image of a country which achieved its independence with no intention of establishing its autonomy in isolation from international relations.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

After Jehovah Witnesses, MP Sharadze sights Muslim University

The Georgian Times (05.10.2000)/ HRWF International Secretariat (12.10.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Guram Sharadze, MP carries on his crusade against religious sects, and religions other than orthodox Christianity. Two days ago, he revealed to the public that a group of Muslims, under the leadership of Alksi Mamedov, is going to found "the Muslim University of people's friendship" in the town of Kareli, some 150 km northwest from Tbilisi. Gia Matiashvili, a deputy education minister, has issued a license of the university. Which should accommodate up to 2000 students.

Mr. Sharadze is known for his intolerance toward foreign religions and his nationalistic views. As the MP admonished, the university delivering only on Turkish would be nothing but one more base for representatives of extremist religions to establish themselves in here, threatening Georgians' ancient belief and statehood.

According to Guram Sharadze all we can blame is the grant of \$60 million for Georgia's education system approved a couple of weeks ago. "Even a cent will not serve for covering backpay for teachers. But, in exchange of this money, they (mysterious and wealthy enemies from abroad) will force to open dozens of alien religious schools in Georgia to poison our minds and make us their servants"- Mr. Sharadze said.

He also unveiled the second news concerning a Baptists' school that, as he said, is conceived to build up in Tbilisi. The MP explained that this school is disguised under a strange name - " Association of Christians with faith in line with Gospel".

Mr. Sharadze's long lasting battle against Jehovah Witnesses ended last summer with abolishment of registration right for this religious current in Georgia. The main supporters of Jehovah Witnesses - spouses Arnold and Sophia Tunglers also left Georgia. Relevant offices did not extend their visas in Georgia.

"Now they are trying to get entrance in Georgia via Georgia's embassies abroad. I warn every embassy not to admit any concession, because those supporters of Jehovah Witnesses inevitably would be detained at any checkpoint of the Georgia's border". Mr. Sharadze recalled his old enemies after divulging the news about the Turkish university.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Court in Republic of Georgia convicts victims of mob attack on Jehovah's Witnesses

Watch Tower/ US Public Affairs Office (05.10.2000)/ HRWF International Secretariat (06.10.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - On September 28, two victims of a mob attack were themselves convicted of "hooliganism," while two of the attackers were not. The victims will appeal the decision.

The Gldani-Nadzaladevi Court in Tbilisi convicted Marian Abaradze and Zaza Koshadze, two victims of an October 1999 mob attack on a religious meeting of Jehovah's Witnesses in Gldani. Abaradze was sentenced to three years probation, and Koshadze to 6 months.

Despite the public prosecutor's request, the judge refused to convict two women who had admitted participating in the attack. One of the women told the court that she had burned literature belonging to Jehovah's Witnesses and would do it again. The claim against these women was sent back for further investigation. The prosecutor said that he will appeal the decision because there is sufficient evidence to convict the women.

On October 17, 1999, a mob led by defrocked Orthodox priest Basili Mkalavishvili attacked Jehovah's Witnesses, beating men, women and children with clubs and iron crosses. Sixteen victims required hospital treatment. One woman lost part of her vision permanently. State investigators did not charge the leaders of the attack. Instead, two elderly women were charged, as well as two of the victims. To date, no other attackers have been charged. None of the attackers have been convicted.

The decision against Abaradze and Koshadze is scandalous, said defense counsel Mamuka Chabashvili. "The victims are condemned, and admitted wrongdoers go unpunished," he said. "This injustice shows that the entire trial was a farce from the beginning. How can there be a fair hearing when a mob takes over a court and intimidates everyone, including the judge?"

During a recess of the trial on August 16, 2000, a mob of about 80 Orthodox extremists stormed the courtroom. Security guards watched but did not interfere. On August 17 outside the courthouse, the same mob attacked and threw rocks at a journalist and a human rights advocate who were present to observe the trial.

See www.jw-media.org/releases/default.htm for background on violence in Georgia.

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[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Orthodox mob tries to silence journalists about program against Jehovah's Witnesses

HRWF (28.09.2000) Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - On 25 September, a crowd of members of the radical Orthodox group of the so-called Eparchy of Gldani led by the unfrocked priest Basil Mkalavishvili rushed into the editorial office of the Rezonansi newspaper and forced the journalists out. After they welded the iron door of the premises that Rezonansi shares with the independent Radio 105 on to the iron framework, the police draw them off. The assailants were angry at an article by Ghia Iakobashvili condemning their repeated assaults upon Jehovah's Witnesses.

Proceeding from the fact that none of those assailants have been punished so far, we have every reason to doubt that this new outrage will ever be punished, Lasha Tugushi, Rezonansi's editor-in-chief writes in his article "Georgia: a country lost in a desert" today (Rezonansi No 262, 26 September 2000). He wonders whether the current authorities are really unable to stop the excesses of Orthodox fundamentalists or they just use the fundamentalism to bully their own reformatory minded opponents.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Police and Orthodox extremists join in beatings as convention site is looted and destroyed

Watch Tower USA (17.09.2000)/ HRWF International Secretariat (19.09.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Police from the town of Marneuli used Basil Mkalavishvili to carry out their threats of violence against Jehovah's Witnesses on the morning of September 16th, says Guram Kvaratskhelia, spokesman for the Witnesses. Police and Basilists attacked on two fronts, at police roadblocks and at the convention site itself.

Mkalavishvili publicly declared in a televised interview last week, to continue violent attacks on non-Orthodox minority religions states Kvaratskhelia. At the same time, Marneuli police were threatening the Witnesses with the use of force to shut down their scheduled convention.

Saturday morning, police roadblocks on major routes to Marneuli stopped all vehicles carrying Jehovah's Witnesses but gave free passage and a police escort to busloads of Orthodox fanatics, followers of Mkalavishvili.

Upon learning that the Basilists had been granted passage and that Marneuli police were encouraging mob action against the Witnesses, convention organizers cancelled the assembly and informed the delegates on the buses to go home.

At one of the police roadblocks a group of Orthodox fanatics attacked the buses as they attempted a return to Tbilisi states Kvaratskhelia. Encouraged by three attending priests they hurled rocks at the buses. Windows shattered under the impact and one woman passenger was struck in the head by a rock. Another bus was stopped and three male passengers were dragged out and beaten. The attackers entered the bus and shouted insults at the men, women and children. One attacker pulled a knife. Others robbed the passengers of their personal belongings. Police at the scene supported and participated in the beatings.

Graphic television news shows Mkalavishvili shouting orders as the Basilits swarmed over the convention site looting and destroying everything in sight. They stormed the adjacent worship center and demolished it. The mob entered the family residence of Ramazi Tsartsidze, situated at the convention site. They robbed the family and then publicly burned their personal library along with Biblical literature looted from the worship center. In a televised interview Mkalavishvili declared that he was confiscating the property.

The police beat at least two male Witnesses and shared in looting the convention site.

The attack by police forces and the Basilists came less than 24 hours after a joint press statement in which the embassies of the United States and Great Britain affirmed that they are greatly disturbed by the serious infringements of the freedom of religion and assembly for Jehovahs Witnesses. They called on the Government of Georgia to be vigilant in ensuring respect for the religious rights of all.

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[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Masked police bring violent halt to religious convention in Republic of Georgia

Watch Tower Public Affairs Office (08.09.2000)/ HRWF International Secretariat (11.09.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Today a troop of club-wielding police broke up a convention of Jehovah's Witnesses by beating several delegates, setting fire to private property and detonating cannon shells.

The masked police "carved a path of destruction" as 700 remaining delegates fled the convention site, said Kakha Pitskheliani, owner of the private property where the convention was held.

"They not only torched the platform and the seating, they entered our family residence and destroyed everything they could," Pitskheliani said. "Several delegates were beaten

and private property was stolen. It was heartbreaking to see the look of terror on the faces of young children as the attackers detonated cannon shells overhead."

The police invasion, including attacks on journalists, was reported by Rusatavi 2 Television on today's evening news. The mayor of Zugdidi, as well as military and police officials, had threatened the convention organizers that they would not allow the convention to proceed, said Genadi Gudadze, a convention speaker from Tbilisi who was present during the attack. The officials ignored several requests to provide written confirmation of a law prohibiting the proposed convention.

The mayor of Zugdidi was advised that Article 25 of the Georgian Constitution guarantees the right of all persons to hold a public assembly without prior permission, said Mamuka Chabashvili, legal counsel for the Witnesses. "Any public official who attempts to disrupt a legal public assembly is in violation of the Criminal Code and subject to prosecution," Chabashvili said.

Families of Jehovah's Witnesses have been attending religious conventions at the same site in Zugdidi three or four times a year for the past several years. The conventions are known for being peaceful and orderly. About 2,000 delegates were expected to attend the three-day convention that began Friday in Zugdidi. It was the last convention in a series of seven held in Georgia over the past few weeks. It was the only one to be broken up.

This week, a European parliament delegation denounced recent attacks on Witnesses and others. In a letter to President Eduard Shevardnadze, Human Rights Watch, a human rights monitoring agency, called for an immediate end to the violence.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Violent attacks on Jehovah's Witnesses spread to western part of Republic of Georgia

Watch Tower Public Affairs Office (09.09.2000)/ HRWF International Secretariat (11.09.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net

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On September 3, 2000, Jehovah's Witnesses were attacked in two cities in the western part of the Republic of Georgia, Senaki and Kutaisi, according to Guram Kvaratskhelia, spokesman for the Witnesses. Members of the Senaki Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses were attacked by an armed group of men, and another Witness was brutalized on a main street of Kutaisi by two policemen.

Yura Papava, a resident of Senaki, said that the congregation was meeting peacefully in his home when "suddenly a man entered the house and demanded to know what we were doing and what we were teaching. Without waiting for an answer, he and five or six other men started smashing the furniture."

The intruders seized the presiding minister and burned him with a cigarette and head butted him in the face, Papava said. When one of the attackers pulled out a gun, some of the women screamed and others tried to escape by jumping from a high window. Among the women who jumped for their lives was a 70-year-old. One woman remains bedridden as a result of injuries sustained in the jump, he said.

"We contacted the police," Papava said. "But when they arrived they were of little help and began to abuse the attack victims with obscene language."

On the same day, Vladimir Gabunia, a Georgian citizen living in Kutaisi, was attacked on the street by two traffic policemen. "I was walking down Nikea Street when one of two traffic police asked me to give him some of our literature," Gabunia said. "When I gave him a magazine, he tore it apart in front of me. His partner punched me in the stomach, and when I doubled over to catch my breath, he took my remaining literature and tore it up. Then he took my two Bibles and put them in his car. They threatened to throw me in the Rioni River and forbade me to walk on the streets."

These assaults come in the wake of numerous attacks in recent months on Jehovah's Witnesses in the Gldani district of Tbilisi. On August 16 and 17, 2000, Orthodox extremists, followers of Basil Mkalavishvili, mounted an attack on people attending a trial at the Gldani-Nadzaladevi courthouse. The mob beat journalists, human rights leaders, and members of Jehovah's Witnesses, including foreign observers. "It seems that the use of violence to express religious intolerance is being given free reign in Georgia," Kvaratskhelia said. "Victims of violence are being denied protection and abandoned without recourse to legal remedies."

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

European Parliament delegation condemns violence against Jehovah's Witnesses in Republic of Georgia

Watch Tower Public Affairs Office (09.09.2000)/ HRWF International Secretariat (11.09.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - This week, a European Parliament delegation condemned a recent mob attack on Jehovah's Witnesses, journalists, and human rights activists in the Republic of Georgia. Georgia was also criticized by Human Rights Watch, a nongovernmental human rights monitoring agency, for its failure over the past several months to punish perpetrators of violent attacks against religious minorities.

Ursula Schleicher, Member of European Parliament and chairperson of the delegation to the EU-Georgia Parliamentary Cooperation Committee, issued a statement on September 5, 2000, condemning an August 16, 2000, attack.

"I regard this kind of attack as an outrageous attack against the fundamental human rights to which Georgia is committed as a signatory of the European Convention for Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms," Schleicher said. She reiterated the committee's May 9, 2000, statement condemning religious intolerance and national extremism, "which are incompatible with the long tradition of religious and cultural tolerance in Georgia."

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Facing up to intolerance in Georgia

RFE/RL (07.09.2000) / HRWF International Secretariat (08.09.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Georgians have traditionally prided themselves on their tolerance towards people of other races and other creeds. But they have not always lived up to that perception of themselves. In the late 1980s Zviad Gamsakhurdia promulgated a vision of "Georgia for Georgians" that was enthusiastically espoused by his supporters and impelled many non-Georgians to flee the republic in fear or reprisals or retribution. More recently, religious minorities, in particular Jehovah's Witnesses, have been the target of violence.

On 30 August, RFE/RL's Tbilisi bureau moderated a discussion between the Georgian National Library Director Levan Berdzenishvili and sociologist Emzar Djgerenaia, who sought to identify the origins of the myth of Georgian tolerance and to suggest how society can progress from that false conviction to a true understanding and practice of tolerance.

Berdzenishvili concurred with the opening suggestion by moderator David Paichadze that Georgians tend to be blinded by their self-image of themselves as tolerant. That image is traditionally substantiated, as Paichadze pointed out, by reference to the fact that within a very small area in Tbilisi you can find a synagogue, a mosque and a Georgian Orthodox

church. Berdzenishvili bewailed his fellow countrymen's disinclination to question whether that stereotype of tolerance can still be applied to Georgians en masse. He linked that reluctance to the broader failure to embark on a fundamental reevaluation of Georgia's history, suggesting that both those failings reflect a low level of political culture.

Berdzenishvili pointed to a tendency among Georgians to see the world in black and white, in absolutes, as a result of which "anyone who disagrees with you is automatically considered an enemy." That tendency is reinforced, Berdzenishvili said, by the absence of

any prominent individual in Georgian society who either serves as a model for religious tolerance or whose views on that subject are universally accepted. He voiced the fear that "we are witnessing the birth of fanaticism, and possibly even fascism."

Nor is intolerance confined to religious belief, Berdzenishvili continued, it also extends to inter-ethnic relations and to what could be termed local patriotism on the micro-level. He noted that Georgians consider themselves superior to other ethnic groups to the point that, "as any family will confirm," it is considered "a tragedy" if a daughter marries an Armenian, or a son marries a Jewish girl.

That sense of superiority, he said, is extended to an individual's immediate geographical milieu, giving rise to animosity between the population of various districts: for example, a resident of the Tbilisi district of Veri will tell you in all seriousness that it is impossible to find a single decent human being in the Tbilisi suburb of Vake.

Berdzenishvili suggested that the most disturbing thing is that there has been no attempt by either the present Georgian leadership or the Georgian Orthodox Church to counter this way of thinking or offer an alternative. "To affirm that Georgia today is a tolerant society," he said, "is to close one's eyes to the way people treat Zviadists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Methodists, Baptists and unmarried mothers [...] Georgia is an intolerant society and it is our so-called intelligentsia, which is a bastion of intolerance, that sets the tone in this respect."

Djgerenaia for his part rejected the idea that Georgians historically were more tolerant than they are today as a myth that has never been proven. He argued that tolerance is a luxury that only a strong state can afford, and historically Georgia has never been a strong state for an extended period of time. He suggested that Georgians adduce the "myth" of their tolerance in order to avoid facing up to tensions in inter-ethnic relations or between various creeds. He also implied that some prominent figures within the Georgian Orthodox Church may bear some measure of responsibility for growing religious tolerance as a result of the emphasis they place on the role of the Georgian church in Georgian history as contrasted with otherfaiths.

Developing the theme of the role and responsibility of the state in promoting tolerance, Berdzenishvili made the point that tolerance is not purely a national trait, and that it is impossible to affirm that simply by virtue of being Georgian, a Georgian is more tolerant

than, say, an Armenian or a Chinese. How tolerant a Georgian, or an Armenian, or a Chinese is, Berdzenishvili continued, depends also on the nature of the state in which he lives and whether that state actively promotes the concept of tolerance, which the present Georgian leadership does only when it is politically expedient to do so -- for example, in the runup to an election in an attempt not to alienate non-Georgian voters. In that context he noted that the very fact that a politician may have an Armenian mother is enough to lose him votes. That road, Berdzenishvili warned, ultimately leads to German-style fascism.

In an attempt to pinpoint the origins of growing intolerance, Djgerenaia pointed to the way Georgian history is taught in Georgian schools. That approach invariably portrays other nationalities as enemies or traitors, never as playing a positive role. Djgerenaia concluded gloomily that "we create and nourish these myths [of tolerance], and then they return to haunt us and poison our existence." He agrees with Berdzenishvili that the

solution to the problem lies in the creation of a strong state that will minimize Georgians' collective insecurity complex, and in the emergence of a new, younger leadership that will actively promote the concept of tolerance. (Liz Fuller)

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Mob attacks journalists and Jehovah's Witnesses in Republic of Georgia courtroom

Watch Tower/ US Public Affairs Office (17.08.2000)/ HRWF International Secretariat (21.08.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - On Wednesday (16 August), a mob of 80 Orthodox extremists, wielding metal crosses and icons, burst into a packed courtroom in Tbilisi, Georgia, attacking journalists, a Canadian lawyer and members of Jehovah's Witnesses who were in the courtroom. Led by defrocked Georgian Orthodox priest Basil Mkalavishvili, the mob screamed, pulled people off seats and threatened to strike others in the head with an eight-foot-high cross.

The hearing is scheduled to continue today.

The court case involved a previous mob attack by Basil's followers. Ironically, prosecutors are charging one of the victims, Mirian Arabidze, with hooliganism. Arabidze was one of 16 Jehovah's Witnesses who required hospital treatment following an attack on October 17, 1999.

On Wednesday, the mob burst into the courtroom after the testimony of Tsiun Mgebrishvili, an Orthodox woman accused of sharing in the earlier attack.

"The extremists stormed into the courtroom soon after Judge Tamazi Sabiashvili called a brief recess," said Warren Shewfelt, a Canadian minister for Jehovah's Witnesses. "Within a few minutes, I was surrounded by about five men and women, chanting and shouting insults. One six-foot-six mobster yanked me off my seat, and two women tore my shirt and wrenched my arm. They were livid, and I barely escaped without further injuries. Although present, the security guards only watched."

The mob carried banners saying, "Gldani Orthodox Eparchy Damns the Satanic Jehovahist Sect." Among those pushed and threatened by the mob were Radio Liberty reporter Sozar Subeliani and Canadian human rights lawyer John Burns. "These extremists were ready to draw blood to get us out of the courtroom," said Burns. "We got the message and left. I was surprised that the judge turned down the motion of local attorney Mamuka Tchabashvili for an adjournment and change of venue. These extremists used violence to take over the courtroom and to chase off peaceful Georgian citizens. How can a fair hearing proceed in the face of open mob rule?"

Since October 17, 1999, there have been at least eight violent attacks on members of Jehovah's Witnesses by religious extremists. Tsiun Mgebrishvili testified in court, "I am so angry at them [Jehovah's Witnesses] that if I meet one now I will burn not only his literature, but I will burn his clothes and run him off naked. . . . If necessary I will cut their heads off." She justified her actions: "I was obeying Orthodox law. I will continue to do it."

Today's events follow the recent decision of a Georgian appeal court on June 26, 2000. On application of ultranationalist Member of Parliament Guram Sharadze, the court revoked the legal registration of Jehovah's Witnesses in Georgia. This decision is now on appeal. There is growing concern, however, that the fires of religious intolerance are growing in Georgia and that violent persecution of other religious minorities will soon follow.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Georgian Parliament to draft law on religion

RFE/RL NewsLine (17.08.2000)/ HRWF International Secretariat (21.08.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The Georgian parliament will create a special group charged with drafting a law on religion, deputy speaker Giga Tsereteli told Caucasus Press on 16 August. He said that bill would be based on the constitutionally-guaranteed principle of freedom of belief but would "regulate" the activities of religious organizations that engage in "anti-national activity and infringe human rights."

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Baptists persecuted

Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (20.08.2000)/ HRWF International Secretariat (21.08.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - The chief of the Tianeti district police, Mr Gigauri, and three other policemen came to the Tianeti Baptist church, broke the service and made a pogrom: they broke the big altar cross, the pulpit and the slab with the inscription "Home of Prayer"; they also tore off another cross but did not destroy it. They took Pastor Kalatozishvili to the police station where Mr Gigauri declared him that if he wanted to pray, he'd better go to an Orthodox Christian church. He also warned him that in case he continued to serve in the Baptist church, he would be arrested: first for 15 days; then for a month; then for six months.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Prosecution of victims of Gldani mob attack scheduled for August 16

Jehovah's Witnesses Public Affairs Office (15.08.2000) / HRWF International Secretariat (16.08.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - On August 16, 2000, a hearing is scheduled for 12:00 p.m. at the Gldani-Nadzaladevi Court (Judge Georgi Sabiashvili) in a case concerning the extremist group of Basil Mkalavishvili, which attacked Jehovah's Witnesses on October 17, 1999. It is surprising that the investigation accused one of the Jehovah's Witness victims, M. Arabidze.

During the attack, Mirian Arabidze suffered various injuries and was one of the 16 given medical assistance at City Hospital No. 1. Televised reports showed men, women, and children attempting to flee and being beaten with clubs and iron crosses.

On October 18, 1999, Gldani District investigator V. Beruashvili ordered a criminal investigation on the bases of Articles 100(2) and 228 of the Georgian Penal Code [GPC]. In October the case was given to police investigator Gocha Khachiuri of the City Investigation Department. It should be noted that the investigator was obviously under the influence of the Basilists, as can be seen from the fact that the victim was accused. Instead of bringing the extremist Basilists to account, he indicted one of Jehovah's Witnesses, Mirian Arabidze, on the basis of GPC 239(3). The order states:

"Mirian Jambulovich Arabidze was guilty of hooliganism, an act which is in blatant violation of the public order and is an expression of clear disrespect to society, with use of a [non-firearm] weapon and which was manifest by the following: On October 17, 1999, during a religious confrontation in the vestibule of the former Akhmeteli Theater, M. Arabidze used a [non-firearm] weapon and inflicted minor injuries for approximately

two minutes to the head of T. Tsiklauri, parishioner of the Gldani Church of St. George. In doing so he blatantly violated the public order and expressed clear disrespect to society."

"It is absurd to issue such a decision against one of the victims" said M. Tchabashvili, M. Arabidze's defense attorney. "70 victims of that attack filed complaints with the city prosecutor. We even have a videotape showing how the Basilists beat their victims and afterwards burn Bibles and private property. The investigator intentionally ignored these events."

The District Prosecutor's Office's inaction and disregard for President Shevardnadze's call to investigate the case signaled to the Basilists that violence pays in Georgia. Since December 1999 they have attacked Jehovah's Witnesses in Tbilisi on several occasions, both inflicting injury and stealing property. If Arabidze's indictment remains in force and the criminals unpunished, we will have become witnesses to the triumph of mob rule over the rule of law in Georgia.

On May 20, 1999, Georgia signed the European Convention of Human Rights. In doing so, it obligated itself before civilized society to defend human rights. If these rights are trampled on, this in itself will cause the destruction of other democratic values. We are confident that the Georgian government does not want this and will do everything it can to defend human rights such as freedom of opinion, conscience, and religion.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Sharadze's supporters intensify violent attacks on Jehovah's Witnesses following court decision

Watch Tower (03.08.2000)/ HRWF (04.08.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Just before noon yesterday a mob of 12-15 followers of Basil Mkalavishvili assaulted two Jehovah's Witnesses walking down Tianet St. in the Gldani District of Tbilisi. Basil Mkalavishvili's followers have joined Guram Sharadze in his crusade against this religious minority.

The victims of the assault, Vladimir Marikyan and Sergey Barsigyan, were repeatedly kicked and struck on the head. The attackers shouted at them with foul language, stole their personal documents, and tore up religious literature that they were carrying. When Sergey Barsigyan demanded that his attacker identify himself, he screamed, "I'm the Georgian Orthodox Church!"

A preliminary medical examination of the victims at Polyclinic #31 indicates that the victims suffered serious head injuries, possibly even brain concussions.

This vicious and cowardly attack is the second in the past week alone. On Friday, 28 July 2000, a mob of Sharadze's supporters encircled and forcibly stopped a busload of Jehovah's Witnesses in Gldani on their way to a religious gathering in Marneuli. The attackers disabled the bus by puncturing a tire and then began to physically mistreat the men, women, and children as they exited the vehicle. Shortly thereafter the mob traveled to Marneuli and demanded that the local police disperse the religious gathering. This was only three days after Sharadze threatened on national TV that the Marneuli authorities would "be held responsible" if the religious convention was allowed to go forward.

Since the Tbilisi Circuit Court's decision on 26 June to grant Sharadze's demand to revoke Jehovah's Witnesses' registration as an association in Georgia, his vitriolic attacks against this religious minority have intensified. "He is asserting that we are illegal, and stirring up hatred and contention against us by making all kinds of ridiculous and untrue statements," said Badri Kopaliani, spokesman for Jehovah's Witnesses. "But actually the Court affirmed our freedom of religion, and his case was granted only on technicalities. Jehovah's Witnesses are not banned," he said, "and the Court has specifically said that."

Jehovah's Witnesses appealed the decision to the Supreme Court on 24 July 2000. Pending a decision by the Supreme Court their registered associations continue to have the full legal rights.

[Back to the Table of Contents](#)

Georgia's Jehovah's Witnesses to Challenge Court Decision on Revoked Registration

by Felix Corley, Keston News Service

KNS (07.07.2000)/ HRWF (10.07.2000) Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email info@hrwf.net - Georgia's Jehovah's Witnesses are to file an appeal at the Supreme Court within the next few weeks against a ruling by a court in the capital Tbilisi that the registration of two of the group's entities should be revoked. The Tbilisi district court upheld the appeal brought by the nationalist politician GURAM SHARADZE against a ruling last February that went in favour of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Sharadze insisted to Keston News Service that Georgian law does not allow any religious group to gain registration as the country has no law on religion. However, a leading official, RUSUDAN BERIDZE, who is responsible for human rights on the National Security Council, told Keston that it is her personal belief that the district court has taken a 'wrong decision'. The Jehovah's Witness lawyer MAMUKA CHABASHVILI stressed that the revocation of their registration will not come into force unless the Supreme Court rejects the group's appeal, which it must file by 26 July.

In the absence of a law on religion in Georgia, most religious groups have no status as juridical persons. Orthodox, Jewish and Lutheran representatives have confirmed to Keston that they have not registered as legal entities.

However, in 1998 the Jehovah's Witnesses registered two organisations at the Isani-Samgori District Court on the basis of Article 31 of the Georgian civil code. The 'Union of Jehovah's Witnesses', a union of local residents with purely religious goals, was registered on 17 April 1998, while the 'Representation of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, USA, in Georgia' was registered on the same basis on 11 June 1998, but as a branch of the American organisation with broader cultural and educational goals including charitable activity.

Sharadze, the leader of the Georgia Above All party and a parliamentary deputy, has long battled against the Jehovah's Witnesses. On 26 June a three-judge panel of the appeals chamber of the Tbilisi district court upheld Sharadze's appeal against the 29 February decision of the Isani-Samgori court in Tbilisi. That court found no grounds for Sharadze's allegations that the Witnesses' literature was anti-state and anti-Orthodox and that their registration was illegal.

Although at the June hearing the court did not fully endorse Sharadze's position, it did rule in favour of his appeal. 'The reasons for the decision were not clear from the hurried reading which was made at the end of the trial,' declared Chabashvili, the lawyer for the Jehovah's Witnesses, in the wake of the hearing. The court handed down the written explanation of its decision on 4 July.

The Jehovah's Witnesses complain that Sharadze's supporters packed the entrance to the courthouse and used physical force to try to bar entrance to anyone who refused to kiss a hand-held wooden cross. Religious icons and wooden crosses were held aloft during the proceedings and votive candles were burned in the courtroom during the recess. The group alleges that many of those present in the courtroom were participants in the mob attack on a Jehovah's Witness meeting on 17 October 1999 in the Gldani district of Tbilisi which resulted in the partial loss of sight by one of the women attacked.

Witness spokesperson GURAM KVARATSKHELIA, expressed concern that the district court decision not be misinterpreted. 'The appeal court's decision does not alter the current legal standing of Jehovah's Witnesses in Georgia.

There is however, a very real danger that some of Mr Sharadze's followers conclude that they now have licence to increase their acts of violence against Jehovah's Witnesses.'

Sharadze told Keston in a telephone interview from Tbilisi on 29 June that he had brought the case because he believes the Jehovah's Witnesses should never have been granted registration as he believes neither the courts nor the Justice Ministry has the power to register religious organisations. 'Articles 31 to 34 of the civil code give the right only to register political, cultural and educational organisations. The Jehovah's Witnesses

are solely a religious group. They therefore CANNOT be registered officially as a religious organisation.' He claimed that no other religious groups apart from the Jehovah's Witnesses have legal status in Georgia, despite the fact that the Jehovah's Witnesses presented to the court a list of 16 religious entities that have registration as social organisations, including the Union of Orthodox Christians and the Methodist Church.

Although he cited what he believed was the 'illegal' registration of the Jehovah's Witnesses as the primary reason for his action to have their registration revoked, Sharadze insisted that the group 'works against the twenty-centuries old Orthodox Church'. 'The Jehovah's Witnesses do not recognise Jesus Christ,' he stressed. Asked why the group's theological position should affect their legal status, Sharadze responded: 'Article 14 of our constitution declares that the state recognises the spiritual role of the Orthodox Church in the history of the Georgian state. The constitution defends the Orthodox Church from sects.' Asked whether he believed other faiths that do not recognise Jesus as God - such as Muslims and Buddhists - should also be restricted, he responded: 'Islam, Catholicism and Buddhism are traditional, historical religions, not sects.'

But Beridze of the National Security Council was highly critical of the court's decision to uphold Sharadze's appeal. 'The constitution recognises freedom of conscience,' she told Keston from Tbilisi on 7 July. Though it recognises the historical role of the Orthodox Church, at the same time it declares that each person has the right to freedom of conscience. This right must be observed.'

She insists that the law allows registration of any organisation without exception, including religious organisations, as long as their statutes are in accordance with the law.

A source in Tbilisi who did not want to be identified told Keston on 7 July that there appears to be a long-term strategy in the state apparatus to limit the activity of Evangelical Christian groups and the Jehovah's Witnesses and, indeed, of any groups apart from the Georgian Orthodox Church. The source reported that a number of religious minority groups are concerned about the implications of the latest court ruling in the Jehovah's Witness case.

Sharadze insists that Georgia should introduce its own law on religion (it is the only former Soviet republic without one). 'I'm asking the government, president and parliament to speed up a law on religion,' he told Keston. 'If such a law is adopted it will help in the fight for a civilised religious life in Georgia.'

Beridze does not oppose the idea of a law, though she would prefer a law not on religion but on freedom of conscience. She told Keston that some believe it is better to have agreements between individual religious groups and the state, such as that planned for the Georgian Orthodox Church. 'But it is my personal opinion that this is not the right way. I believe there should be a law on freedom of conscience including all aspects of the

question and based firmly on Articles 9 and 19 of the constitution which guarantee freedom of conscience.'

[Back to the Table of Contents](#)

Jehovah's Witnesses to appeal Tbilisi district court's ruling against religious freedom

Watch Tower Public Affairs Office (27.06.2000)/ HRWF (29.06.2000) - Website <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email info@hrwf.net - On June 26th, the appeals chamber of the Tbilisi district court upheld an appeal by ultra-nationalist politician Guram Sharadze calling for the revocation of the legal registration of Jehovah's Witnesses in Georgia.

The three-judge panel overturned the February 29th decision of the Isani-Samgori court in Tbilisi. That court found no grounds for Mr. Sharadze's allegations that the Witnesses' literature was anti-state and anti-orthodox and that their registration was illegal.

"The reasons for the decision were not clear from the hurried reading which was made at the end of the trial" states Mamuka Chabashvili, lawyer for Jehovah's Witnesses. "The written reasons for the decision are to be given in five days. That will leave us three weeks to file our appeal."

Mr. Sharadze's supporters packed the entrance to the courthouse and used physical force in an attempt to bar entrance to anyone who refused to kiss a hand-held wooden cross. Religious icons and wooden crosses were held aloft during the proceedings and votive candles were burned in the courtroom during the recess.

Witness spokesperson Guram Kvaratskhelia, expressed concern that the district court decision not be misinterpreted. "The appeal court's decision does not alter the current legal standing of Jehovah's Witnesses in Georgia. There is however, a very real danger that some of Mr. Sharadze's followers conclude that they now have license to increase their acts of violence against Jehovah's Witnesses." Many of those present in the courtroom were participants in the Gldani mob attack on Jehovah's Witnesses on October 17, 1999 resulting in the partial loss of sight by one of the women attacked.

It is of interest that this trial began on the June 23rd, the same day that the highest administrative court in France ruled that Jehovah's Witnesses meet the criteria of a religious organization as defined by the laws of that country. It remains to be seen if the Supreme Court of Georgia will uphold the principles of religious freedom guaranteed by its constitution.

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[Back to the Table of Contents](#)

Gldani mob attack sanctioned : investigator charges victim with assault

Watch Tower (10.06.2000) / HRWF International Secretariat (14.06.2000) - Website www.hrwf.net - Email: info@hrwf.net - While attending a Sunday morning religious service in the Gldani district of Tbilisi on October 17, 1999, a group of 120 people were savagely attacked by followers of radical sect leader Basili Mkalavishvili. Mr. Mirian Arabidze was among sixteen attack victims requiring immediate hospital treatment. He sustained multiple injuries to the head. Televised news reports show men, women and children being assaulted with sticks and iron crosses as they attempted to flee.

Mr. Gocha Khachiuri of the Investigation Department of the City Administration of the Ministry of Internal Affairs was responsible to investigate these cases. He informed a lawyer representing the attack victims, that he could not remain impartial in his investigation because he is Orthodox. Yesterday, Mr. Khachiuri served notice that Mr. Arabidze is being charged with assault during the October 17th mob attack.

"The decision to lay charges against one of the victims is absurd," stated Mamuka Chabashvili, defense lawyer for Mr. Arabidze. "There are about 70 victims that have filed applications with the City Public Prosecutor. We have video footage of the Basilists beating their victims and then burning Bibles and personal possessions. The inspector has deliberately chosen to ignore this evidence."

"In spite of President Shevardnadze's call for an investigation and a criminal case, no charges have been laid against the perpetrators of October 17th mob attack," stated Arno Tungler, local representative for Jehovah's Witnesses. "The failure of the Gldani and Tbilisi's prosecutor's offices to take any action against the perpetrators of this mob action has sent a clear message - mob violence is permissible in Georgia. In a string of attacks since December, 1999, Jehovah's Witnesses living in the Gldani district of Tbilisi, have been assaulted and robbed by Basilists.

"If this prosecution of Mr. Arabidze proceeds, we are seeing mob rule being sanctioned and an end to rule by law. No one in Georgia will be safe."

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[Back to the Table of Contents](#)

Tbilisi court protects religious freedom

Watch Tower (01.03.2000)/HRWF International Secretariat (02.03.2000) - Website: <http://www.hrwf.net> - Email: info@hrwf.net - Today, the Isani-Samgori District Court in Tbilisi upheld religious freedom by refusing an application to ban Jehovah's Witnesses in the Republic of Georgia. A report issued by a panel of religious experts consulted by the court said they "found no aggression of any kind" in the religious literature of Jehovah's Witnesses and urged religious tolerance in Georgia.

The plaintiff, parliamentarian Guram Sharadze, and his political party "Georgia Over All!" had tried to convince the civil court that Jehovah's Witnesses should be banned and import of their literature stopped, alleging that they were anti-State, anti-national and anti-Orthodox.

In November, the court heard testimony from nine lay witnesses. The hearing was adjourned to permit a panel of court-appointed experts to analyze the literature of Jehovah's Witnesses. The report, prepared by the Institute of Philosophy in the Academy of Sciences of Georgia and the Faculty of Sociology of the Javakhishvili State University in Tbilisi, stated that the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses do not involve the Georgian state or the Georgian Orthodox Church.

"This organization is one interpretation of Christian teaching; it is based on the Bible with its own distinctive understanding and does not touch on Georgian statehood or the Georgian nation at all," the report stated. "The principles . . . are not anti-Orthodox."

The expert panel said that an attack on one religious faith is an attack on the freedom of all. "[V]ariance in the interpretations of the Bible . . . will be a subject of dialogue, discussion and debate, but discussions and debates should not grow into prohibitions and insults." The report also warned that prohibitions on religious freedom as urged by the plaintiff would be moving back toward "dictatorship."

"The decision is of benefit to all citizens of Georgia, not only Jehovah's Witnesses," said Mamuka Chabashvili, Georgian defense attorney in the case. "The right of religious freedom belongs to all, not only those of the majority faith."

Chabashvili said he hopes that the court's intolerance of religious bigotry will send a message to extremists in Gldani who have physically attacked Jehovah's Witnesses, including women and children, four times in the past four months. None of the attackers has been prosecuted. President Eduard Shevardnadze had condemned the October 17, 1999, mob attack on Jehovah's Witnesses and called for an investigation.

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