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I 'like' my Patriarch. Religion on Facebook

New Forms of Religiosity in Contemporary Georgia

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Abstract

Rising of religiousness is a significant characteristic of Georgian society in post-communistic period. Revitalization of religion is vivid as on individual (increased amount of religious people) as well as on institutional (increased role and authority of the Church) level.

Increased religiosity is manifested not only in a traditional form of piety (church attendance, observance of rituals), but also in expression if religion in new media (preaches of clerics on youtube, church bell as ringtones in mobile phone, picture of church as desktop photos). How is religion transferred on facebook? Is facebook a kind of space of public religiosity in contemporary Georgia?

According to recent studies facebook is Georgia's most popular Internet platform. Facebook is a space, where people most widely and frequently discuss religious issues, whether it is orthodox religious opinions or critical understanding of religion. Most frequently users of facebook are young people. The paper seeks to understand how religion is present on facebook and how young people affiliate with religious issues. The paper deals with the question if "religious face" on facebook correlates with religious identity in life. Therefore the aim of proposed paper is to explore new tendencies of religiosity of young people, what kind of influence does religion have on facebook in construction of identity.

Generally, the paper will try to explore the new forms of religiousness (for example asking forgiveness publicly on facebook on "day of forgiveness") - is it performance of traditional religion through new medium or are we dealing with profanation of religion?

Keywords

1   Introduction

Rising of religiousness is a significant characteristic of Georgian society in post-communistic period. Revitalization of religion is vivid as on individual (increased amount of religious people) as well as on institutional (increased role and authority of the Church) level.

Increased religiosity is manifested not only in a traditional form of piety (church attendance, observance of rituals), but also in expression of religion in new media (preaches of clerics on YouTube, church bell as ringtones in mobile phone, picture of church as desktop photos, discussion religious issues on social networks). The aim of this paper is to discuss how religion is transferred on facebook. Generally, the paper will try to explore the new forms of religiousness (for example asking forgiveness publicly on facebook on "day of forgiveness") Is facebook a kind of space of public religiosity in contemporary Georgia, is it performance of traditional religion through new medium or is it an arena of de-sacralization of religion?

According to recent studies facebook is Georgia's most popular Internet platform.[1] Facebook in Georgia is a space of discussion and socialization. It is a space, where people most widely and frequently discuss religious issues, whether it is orthodox religious opinions or critical understanding of religion. It can be assumed that this new media changes the forms and usage of religious symbols, religious thoughts of modern people (transformation religious identity of Georgians goes beyond just sharing photos of priests and religious quotations). Facebook as social media, which in addition to allowing connecting people, creates new forms of communication and new rules of behavior. The paper deals with the question if "religious face" on facebook correlates with religious identity in life.

Most frequent users of facebook are young people. The paper seeks to understand how religion is present on facebook and how young people affiliate with religious issues. Therefore the aim of proposed paper is to explore new tendencies of religiosity of young people. Researching the quality of religiosity and its forms among the young users of social networks allows for studying the impact of the modern new media on identity embraced by the youth, as well as determining the forms of this impact on their identity, a space for religion on their facebook and more generally, addressing the question of whether the social network supports religious or secular thinking, in other words, whether the facebook supports the process of individualization therefore acting as a precondition for secularization.

In order to discuss the specifics of expression of religion in the social network and identify correlation between the religious identity and facebook identity among the youth based on

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1   Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC): The Caucasus Barometer, Tbilisi, 2012.

Georgia's case, the paper provides a brief overview of some key theoretical frameworks and latest achievements in respective research.

2   Research Review – Religion in digital and post-secular age

2.1   „Religion goes public"

According to the classical paradigm of secularization, technical progress and modernization facilitate a secularization process (Wilson 1966, 1976).[2] It is true that the manifestation of secularism in Europe varies in forms and qualities (decline in traditional religiousity, prevatization of religion, decrease in the number of churchgoers), however, it is also evident that religion is being established in its new form. Contemporary theories try to explain the *comeback of religion* (Rieserodt 2001) in modern society. It can be assumed that, the return of religious is a kind of transformation of the forms of religiosity and it has never vanished.

New forms of religion and religiousness that emerged in modern (secular) societies led Luckmann to reflect on the changing role and function of religion in a modern society; Along the concept of invisible religion (Luckmann , 1963, 1993) and deinstitutionalization of religion (Gabriel 1996), there is now an actual paradigm "De-secularization of the World" (Berger 1999). Piter L. Berger (1999, 2) disagrees with the statement that 'modernisation has had some secularizing effects, more in some places than in other. But it has also provoked powerful movements of counter secularization. Also secularization on the societal level is not necessarily linked to secularization on the level of individual consciousness. Certain religious institutions have lost power and influence in many societies, but both old and new religious beliefs and practices have nevertheless continued in the lives of individuals, sometimes taking new institutional forms and sometimes leading to great explosions of religious fervor' (Berger, 1999, 3) and considers it a mistake of a theory of the secularism.

Modernization affects religion, but this is not a unilateral correlation, rather a complex relationship. Some religious individuals consider modernity as a looming threat while others accept it and try to find new forms of establishing themselves (cif. Berger 1999, 3). It was already in the beginning of 1960s when Luckmann started talking about the transformation of the forms of

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2   "Industrialization brought with series of social changes – the fragmentation of the life-world, the decline of community, the rise of bureaucracy, technological consciousness – that together made Religion less arresting and less plausible then it had been in pre-modern societies", Bruce, S 2002, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West*, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford, p. 36.

religiosity (Luckmann 1963, 1993). A thesis of invisible religion (Die Unsichtbare Religion) indicates to the diminished role of institutional religion (a model of medieval church now belongs to the past), however, this does not mean that religion has faded away on an individual level. On the very contrary - individual spirituality is now evident. Besides, this subjective religiosity is syncretic and often represents a blend of individual and institutionalized religion. That is why we it cannot be asserted that institutional religion has gone and only individual religion has remained (cif. Berger, 1999, 4). However, individual religiosity is more apparent in the Western society with its diversity and vibrant development. 'Being 'spiritual but not religious' is one of the western phenomena' (Taylor 2007, 535).

Striving towards autonomy is one of the characteristics of a modern human (Luckmann 1993, 140). Therefore, a modern human being is trying to find new, individual forms of religiosity. Religion acquires new social form and the church is not a sole form, but one of many. This non-institutional 'invisible religion' stands close to Knoblauch's thesis of popular religion and (popular) spiritualism Both Luckmann and Knoblauch aim at identifying a form of expression and content of religiosity in modernity. Knoblauch argues that spiritualism is not an alternative to institutional religion or a counter concept (unlike Heelas and Woodhead 2005). He argues that spiritualism has become a part of secular and popular culture. Manifestation for popular religion and spiritualism can be considered as an incentive factor for transforming religion (Knoblauch 2009).

Religions have acquired new forms and have become increasingly influential actors in society in recent times.[3] The "trace" of religion can be found in political processes and cultural identity and values. More importantly, religion has become a major actor of public life.[4]

Having gone through a kind of adaptation in post modern society, religion is striving to embrace new spaces. Public discourse based on religious arguments has become more frequent and religious groups appear to have emerged in political and public arenas. The paradigm of secularism that gained momentum at the end of the 20th century holds that religion in 'postsecular' societies cannot be completely separated from the public discourse (Habermas 2001). Post-secular Europe means, as Taylor puts it, not devaluation of faith and religious practice, but the time 'in which the hegemony of the mainstream master narrative if secularization will be more and more challenged' (Taylor 2007, 534).

In his acclaimed work *Public Religions in the Modern World* (1994) Casanova, building on Polish, Spanish, American and Brazilian experiences, illustrates the influences of religious groups

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3   Luckmann, Th. 1963, *Das Problem der Religion in der modernen Gesellschaft. Institution, Person und Weltanschauung*, Rombach Freiburg, 1963; ib. 1993, *Die unsichtbare Religion*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M.

4   On the new wave of scientific debate see: Habermas, J 2001, *Glauben und Wissen,* Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels, viewed 1.August 2014. http://www.friedenspreis-des-deutschen-buchhandels.de/sixcms/media.php/1290/2001_habermas.pdf, Casanova, J 1994, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago; Taylor, C. 2007, *A secular age*, Belknap, Cambridge, Mass.

on broader public. Privatization of religion representing one of the aspects of classical secularism paradigm is the one most often questioned. Religion has become a part of the public space; hence, Casanova (1994) offers the thesis known as Deprivatization of Religion arguing that the public interest towards the church and religious issues has increased (Casanova 1994).

> By deprivatization I mean the fact that religious traditions throughout the world are refusing to accept the marginal and privatized role which theories of modernity as well as theories of secularization had reserved for them. (…)Similarly, religious institutions and organizations refuse to restrict themselves to the pastoral care of individual souls and continue to raise questions about the interconnections of private and public morality and to challenge the claims of the subsystems, particularly states and markets, to be exempt from extraneous normative consideration is dual, interrelated process of repoliticization of the private religious and moral spheres and renormativization of the public economic and political spheres. This is what I call, for lack of a better term, the deprivatization' of religion. (Casanova, 1994, p. 5f)

Casanova's view on deprivatization of religion can also fit a paradigm of religious transformation. As Casanova argues this is 'dual interrelated process' (Casanova 1996, 359). Namely, a modern (individual) form of religiosity is becoming increasingly public. Thus, religion 'goes' public.

The Internet, computer technologies and the new media are the means that have given a new image and rhythm to the modern society. New scientific achievements represent a process of rationalization bringing irrational and religious argumentation to question ever often. However, it is evident, that the same process supports deprivatization or transformation of religion as the new media technologies have become handy instruments for religion to promote missionary work, religious expression and self establishment while to individuals advanced technologies offer valuable resource for expressing religious identity and transferring religious practices to online dimension.

2.2 Popular religion

The Internet has introduced a new dimension in a human life. It has become a new place for socializing and as its popularity rises and the scale widens, so does its role in everyday life. 'Renaissance of Religion' and 'the return of religions' mentioned above affects not only offline public sphere but also online world. Although with a varying degree of skepticism yet the Internet has become a home for religious groups for missionary work, control and spiritual rebirth. Together with traditional religions, there is a space also found by non-institutionalized and popular religions (Helland 2004).

By Knoblauch's (2008a, p. 43) definition a popular religion represents a new social form, which goes beyond church and the institute. For Knoblauch such phenomenon is not the return of religion but just a change and broadening in the form of religion.[5] Knoblauch's concept of popular religion is broad and encompasses not only the manifestation of religious symbols and concepts in pop-culture, but also manifestation of religion through different media means including those forms that are often believed to be superstitious (esotericism, spiritism, magical energy of stones, belief in reincarnation etc). Popular religion has an affinity with the concept of popular religiosity (i.e. belief in prophecies, enchantments, protecting spirits). For Knoblauch mass phenomena and shrines also contain signs of popular religion.

Popular religion may be grounded on believes in supernatural forces as well as on religious-transcendental phenomena (Knoblauch 2006).[6] It is quite common to display crosses and icons in Georgian public transport, public institutes as well as in shops and the cult of healing water, wondrous icons, places and items is also quite popular. A new mass 'rite' of crossing at the sight of any church, at any place and from any location also contains a sign of popular religion. Such expressions of religiosity in Georgia go side by side with other forms of popular religiosity pertaining to pagan believes and rites. These rites are brought back to live in popular religious celebrations where Christian and pagan rituals, believes and faiths are intertwined (the examples of such mixed faith are cult rituals dedicated to St. George, Prophet Elijah and Mother of God still performed in the mountainous areas in Georgia).

The popular religion does not solely refer to religiosity existing beyond the limits of religious groups. For Knoblauch the media coverage and highlights of the Pope's pompous visits, is also a form of popular religion ("Die Eventisierung der religiösen Zeremonie") (Knoblauch 2008b). Looking at the Georgian context, the popularity and public trust enjoyed by the religious leader of the country, Patriarch Ilia II contain the forms of popular religiosity. This very popularity of the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church is extremely close to that of a leader's because of transparency and common belonging. Both practicing and non-practicing individuals express their loyalty towards the Patriarch. The popularity of Patriarch as well as popularity of geographical places and events that are associated with him points out that borders characterizing religion are being eliminated between the sacred and the profane whereby the sacred becomes a part of the profane.

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5   See: Knoblauch, H 2000, Populäre 'Religion. Markt, Medien und die Popularisierung der Religion', *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* no.8, pp. 143 –161; Knoblauch, H.& Schnettler, B 2004, Die Trägheit der Säkularisierung und die Trägheit des Glaubens: Der Trendmonitor religiöse Kommunikation' und die religiöse Kommunikation heute, Ziebertz HG (ed.), *Erosion des christlichen Glaubens*, Lit Verlag, Münster, pp. 5-15.

6   The notion of popular religiosity originates from the Roman times - „religion populaire", „religiosità populare". However, in its modern usage, the term implies popular religiosity and superstition.

Knoblauch (2008a, p. 43) draws his attention on the key characteristics of popular religion: market, media, and pop-culture. For Knoblauch (2006) Electronic Church[7], New Age movement and pompous visits of the Pope are all examples of popular religion. On the other hand, Casanova (1994) deems these practices as the forms of public religion and adds TV-Evangelism to the list. The concepts of public and popular religions are similar in notion: both are characterized by popularity and openness having at the same time the forms of mass culture. "Their market products are available to broad public". Religious communication penetrates various forms of life and therefore it is becoming more visible and more public.

Transformation of the forms pertaining to traditional religion (Luckmann 1991) blurred the fine lines between popular religion and profanation of religion or occupation of new cyber-spaces by the religion. Together with new technologies, new forms of communications are being developed and the same refers to the religious communication. Structural transformation of communication has resulted in destroying borders between the public and the private (Knoblauch 2008b).

Popular religion often experiences symbiosis with church religiosity. It is not rare when a religious entity (church) tries to be a source for popular religion in order to reinforce its status with one or another form of religiosity, and also to simply apply to new means of communications to booster religiosity. Together with the emergence of new technologies and spaces for socialization, religious institute has lost its hegemony as it ceased to be the sole owner of religious communications means. Popular religion or new spiritualism as Knoblauch puts it, is growing beyond the realms of the institute (2008b).

Yet another aspect worth mentioning, is that popular religion is vividly subjective, which, on the other hand, does not necessarily indicate to its privacy. Popular religion removes the line between privacy and publicity being located in between them (Knoblauch, 2006). As mentioned above, the forms of popular religiosity may appear in public sphere in the form of active and visible institute, i.e. Casanova's 'public religion' (1994).

If we consider the Internet as a combination of media and market, that largely characterizes popular religion, then cyber sphere and new media means are perfect instruments for promoting both popular religiosity and traditional religions (Helland 2004). You are individually traveling across the limitless and digital religious world. The Internet, as a free and limitless space, is a perfect place for the revitalization of religion. Online space is open for private, traditional and new religions.

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7   Electronic Church is preaching Christianity and calling for missionary work through TV or other new media, radio, websites (cf. Hoover, SM. 1988, *Mass Media Religion. The Social Sources of the Electronic Church*. Newbury Park, CA.).

Helland defines popular religion as unofficial religion. While differentiating between official and unofficial religions, he relies on the definition provided by McGuire, who argues that official religion is 'set of beliefs and practices prescribed, regulated and socialized by organized, specifically religious groups… which set norms of belief and action for their members, and … establish an official model of what means to be one of us" (McGuire 1997, p.101). Helland chooses to call popular religion unofficial religion and defines it as "set of religious and quasi religious beliefs and practices that is not accepted, recognized, or controlled by official religious groups" (McGuire 1997, p.108)

The definition of popular religion referred below is of Knoblauch's, implying the expression of religion through different means of communication. This definition encompasses both unofficial religion as well as untraditional religiosity, as identified by the institute, which is often on the brink of spiritualism, magic and profanation.

2.3   When religion meets digital world

Scholars working on religion have been paying particular attention to relations between religion, the Internet and new communication technologies. As mentioned above the comeback of the religion is reflected on the virtual world: religion side by side with sex is one of the most popular topics in the Internet (2004).[8]

Scientific research on the internet and religion has gained a new momentum: new terms have been coined and the observations/discoveries from new surveys have come to the surface. The forms of religious expressions have gained new forms together with the development of the Internet and new media technologies. In 1999 Yahoo sub-category on religion listed 11.000 websites on the Christian belief, 64% of which were dedicated to official denominations. By 2002 the number of the websites had raised 300%. Christianity is the most widely represented religion online accounting for 78% of online religious websites (Helland 2004, p. 26f). As Helland (2007) observes, most traditional religions widely use the Internet. Religious individuals find the Internet as "spiritual medium facilitating religious experience, a sacramental space suitable for religious use, a tool promoting religion or religious practice and a technology for affirming religious life" (Campbell, 2005, pp. 9-10). Hence, those practicing religion have started or continued to practice religion online. The Internet has become "a tool to extend a church´s offline ministry into online spaces" (Campbell 2013, p. 1).

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8   According to Knoblauch (2006) The number of the Christian webpages has increased from 610.000 to 9.1 million between 1999 and 2004 while the church launched webpages hit 65 million from 7 million in the search engines.

A new term 'digital religion' has emerged lately reflecting on the development of digital media and a wide representation of religion in it (Campbell 2013).[9] Digital religion is a religion which is being born in a new (digital) environment under the influence of new technologies.[10] Campbell's term is a broad notion and includes not only the religious practice which has developed under the influence of digital media technologies but also any form of online religion. Campbell focuses on one of the characteristics of digital religion that ties together online and offline religious field.

> We can think of digital religion as a bridge that connects and extends online religious practices and spaces into offline religious contexts, and vice versa. This merging of new and established notions of religious practice means digital religion is imprinted by both the traits of online culture (such as interactivity, convergence, and audience-generated content) and traditional religion (such as patterns of belief and ritual tied to historically grounded communities). (Campbell H, 2013, p. 3f)

The relationship between religion on the one hand, and the Internet and new technologies, on the other, is a mutual shaping[11]. Together with the emergence of new forms of religious expression and religiosity, new spiritual believes and perceptions are also developing.

2.4   Identity in digital age

A human being is in the center of the media-religion relations being both a creator and the object of this interaction. The Internet, mass, digital and social media actively participate in everyday life. Interaction with the media gives rise to new forms of self expression and new sets of behavior with new rules and new identities (cf. Turkle 1995).

Sherry Turkle (2005) argues that the technologies influence not only what people do, but also how they think and what they think of (Turkle 1984). Virtual, medialized space offers new forms of socialization and dictates new rules. In medialized reality, the interaction between religious or secular leaders, groups and individuals with the media, influences and shapes individual identities. In our digital century or as puts it, in late modern society, a human being is medialized (cf. Hjarvard & Lövheim (2012). She or he owns more than one identity, both real and virtual. The question here is to what extent our online self is our real self. We carry a few personality (cf. multiple self by

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9   More about see Campbell, Heidi (ed.) (2013). *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds,* Routledge, London and New York.

10 1990s saw the emergence of a new term cyber-religion, "a way to describe the importing of virtual reality technologies" (Campbell 2013, 2f). The term failed to embrase the diversity generating from relations existing between digital media and religion and therefore required further expension.

11 See MacKenzie, D & Wajcman, J 1999, *The Social Shaping of Technology*, Open University Press, Buckingham, UK ; Williams, & Edge, D 1996, 'The Social Shaping of Technology', *Research Policy,* Vol. 25, 1996, pp. 865-899.

Turkle 1995). They are not homogenous, but are linked to each other. 'Virtual self' is an echo of a real one, mirroring our real selves, as argued by Turkle (1994).. However, virtual self is more versatile and fragile.

The opportunity to acquire multiple identities or avatars (Turkle 1995) makes the virtual space even more attractive for its users who can change or reinvent their images, have multiple selves/avatars. Users tend to constantly seize such an opportunity.

> The experience of playing selves in various cyber-contexts, perhaps even at the same time, on multiple windows, is a concretization of a way of thinking about the self, not as unitary but as multiple. In this view, we move among various self states, various aspects of self.[12]

This quality pertaining to the online world shakes the idea of a single identity to the core. Similar to the real world whereby an individual performs multiple social roles, their identity is not a whole and static. Virtual world gives us an opportunity to recognize our selves and develop further. Through the Internet so called "transitional space" (Lövheim 2005) has been created in which oneself can be presented through and interact with others with online computer-mediated communication (CMC). Being online means being public and private at the same time.

> One has a new space for commenting on the complexities and contradictions among the selves. So, experiences in cyberspace encourage us to discover and find a new way to talk about the self as multiple and about psychological health not in terms of constructing a one but of negotiating the many.[13]

Through the social networks, individual's online identity has come closer to his or her real image. In fact, a Facebook image is perfect leaving little space for inspiration towards recognition, performance and narcissism, which is not unfamiliar for the Facebook community (cf. Carpenter 2012, p. 483). In a way this is just *self in profile*. The Facebook reflects individual's aspirations, desires, interests and other identity. Often people 'live' under different images, behavior and of course, name in the social network. It is not rare when they 'use' Facebook and Twitter for different purposes. In most cases this is two radically different persons in different social networks. However, the source of projection is a single individual.

A user's choice of profile picture varies from his or her own photo to those of celebrities and role models. Sometimes photos of children and friends are also used as profile a picture which

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12 An Interview with Sherry Turkle. Interview was conducted in February 1999 by Joseph E. Davis, viewed 12 August 2014, http://www.iasc-culture.org/THR/archives/Identity/1.1KTurkle.pdf.

13 An Interview with Sherry Turkle. Interview was conducted in February 1999 by Joseph E. Davis, viewed 12 August 2014, http://www.iasc-culture.org/THR/archives/Identity/1.1KTurkle.pdf.

indicates that the user's image is closer to his or her real emotions. Occasionally profile pictures may go beyond individuality and depict historic moments or important ongoing events. For example, active Georgian users of Facebook had the Japanese flag as their profile pictures for months thus expressing their solidarity towards the tsunami and power plant explosion victims in Japan in 2010. The same happened in 2013 concerning the notorious political crisis in Ukraine. Hence, the forms and scale of expressing solidarity are undergoing changes. Moreover, the attitudes and behaviors of a user towards one or another ideology also changes (cf. Lövheim 2012, Lövheim, M, Jansson, A, Paasonen S & Sumiala, J 2013).

3   Renaissance of Religion in Georgia – Some main tendencies in contemporary Georgia

3.1   Rising of Religiousness and Trust towards the Georgian – Orthodox- Church

One of the most important trends in post Soviet Georgia is a growing significance of religion and the church. From the period following the independence in 1990, the importance of religion and its influence on political and social areas has been steadily growing. Religion largely determines and reinforces the identity of a modern Georgian and therefore, religious opinions and related issues have played a significant role in the national discourse (Zviadadze 2014a). Apart from the growth of individual religiousness, the increasingly active involvement of the Church in social and political processes is another sign of religious resurgence.

A rise in individual religiosity in the Georgian society resulted in growing popularity of and trust towards the Church (Georgian Orthodox Church). This trend can be explained by the opportunities for development after a long period of outlawing religion under the communist rule, on the one hand[14], and on the other, it has become a source for addressing spiritual and ideological gap during the social and political crisis. In addition, religion was considered as an important part of national identity in Georgia. In the post-independence period, the Church has played an increasingly important role in the national discourse. The fact that religion and ethnic identity are closely intertwined has bolstered loyalty towards the Church, which has accumulated a substantial symbolic capital (Zviadadze 2014b).

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14 The theory of modernization predicted that Eastern European countries would adopt the western model of modernization. In post-communist countries, however, this process led to the resurgence of religion and the rise of nationalism. See: Pollack, D, Borowik, I & Jagodzinski, W. (eds.) (1998), Religiöser Wandel in den postkommunistischen Länder Ost- und Mitteleuropas,Ergon, Würzburg.

A broad representation of religion in public space is another characteristic of the modern Georgia. Religion is a part of the media, public debates and political discourse. Religion is visible, as seen in the increased number of people participating in religious services, the majority of which are young people, the increased authority of religious leaders, the closer alignment of the Church and the State, the use of religion as an instrument in political affairs and the increased influence of religion (the Church) on different spheres of public life.[15] The Church´s role in Georgia´s public life is the topic of frequent discussions in media and social networks. It is not rare that the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church Ilia II serves as a mediator during political confrontations, commenting on appropriateness of adopting one or another law. Political leaders often express their loyalty towards the Church, in particular the Patriarch. Public expression of respect towards the religion and the Patriarch by popular figures is an integral part of the Georgian religiosity.

3.2   Religion as a significant determinant of national identity of Georgian Youth

Religiosity among the Georgian youth is quite strong. As illustrated by the latest surveys, religion occupies a significant place in social life and is important for their identities (Sumbadze 2012).

Religion is very important for young people.[16] Most of the Georgian churchgoers are young people. Their lifestyle is greatly influenced by religion. They strictly adhere to religious practices and traditions (regularly attend religious services, absolve, and observe religious fasts and holidays). They tend to think that religion is not only a private matter, for them it is an essential element of their social status. It is a source of their self-identification. The majority of respondents (65.9 %) believe that being Christian is more important for their self-identification than being a citizen of Georgia (Sumbadze 2012, p. 56).

For religious Georgian youth, the Internet and social media represent a new space for religious socialization (Lövheim 2012, p.153). Lövheim holds that such a venue for traditional socialization as church is, plays insignificant role for the religious socialization for the Swedish youth (Lövheim 2012, p.154). When comparing with the Georgian society, the rise in religiosity in post-communist period draws a different picture. Here the traditional arenas for religious socialization that are still well preserved are coupled with adaptation of new domains. Together with the end of the communist secularism, religion has filled ideological gap and penetrated in every public sphere. The growing reputation of religion and religious leaders (the Patriarch and the clergy)

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15 All recent surveys show that the Church is the most trusted public institution (86 per cent) and the Patriarch is the most trusted person (90 per cent) in Georgia. Public attitudes towards elections in Georgia: Results of a April 2010 survey carried out by National Democratic Institute (NDI) http://www.ndi.org/files/Georgia_Public_Opinion_0410.pdf.
16 Significant majority of the respondents believe in God (96.7 %) and in sin (83.0 %), Sumbadze (2012), p.55.

has turned the church into an important arena for religious socialization. Reinforcement of religion in Georgia has coincided with the rise in new technologies and the process of public medialization. Therefore, the area of traditional religiosity has intertwined with the new spheres of socialization. 1990s saw the boom in religious literature and printed media while the Internet has become the most important venue for disseminating religious literature. The Internet homes such religious texts that are only available online including the sermons of the priests, conversations on religious themes, which has become a form of receiving information related to religious issues. Traditional and untraditional spheres of socialization, church[17], friends, and the Internet represent the broadest arena for religious socialization for the Georgian youth[18].

Based on the survey results conducted among the students of Ilia State University, we are going to have a closer look at the diversified role of the social media in regards to religion.

3.3   Facebook - most popular internet platform in Georgia

The Internet gives its users an opportunity to use a new space for spiritual life.[19] Nowadays the Internet is spiritualized ("Spiritualizing the internet") (Campbell 2005). With over 900.000 users Facebook is one of the most popular and influential media tools in Georgia (Tsuladze, Berzenishvili, Esebua, Kakhidze, Macharadze & Kvintradze 2012). According to Social Baker, more than 75% of Georgian population uses the Internet while approximately 20% of the country population is Facebook users.[20]

There has not been any comprehensive study carried out in Georgia on social media and therefore empirical evidence on how religious groups use Facebook is not available. However, there is a body of research in Georgia focusing on the condition of the social media and its functioning. In Georgian social media space, social media fulfills just one out of its four functions (information, entertainment, democracy and control) – entertainment (Tsuladze, Berzenishvili, Esebua, Kakhidze, Matcharadze & Kvintradze 2012). To briefly characterize the Georgian media space (especially

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17 It would be inappropriate to consider parents as the source of socialisation for traditional religion as this generation belongs to the Communist with banned religious practices.

18 The survey shows that the Church and the family represent the most marginalized arenas for socialization, while the role of the media, school and peers are coming to the front. (Lövheim 2012, p. 155).

19 "Spiritualising the Internet means the Internet is seen as a technology or space that is suitable for religious engagement, whereby allowing users to include Internet-based activities into rhythm of their spiritual lives", Campbell, H (2005). Spiritualising the Internet: Uncovering discourses and narratives of religious Internet usage. *Online-Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet*, 1 (1) viewed 17 August 2014 http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/volltexte/2005/5824/pdf/Campbell4a.pdf.

20 Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC), *The Caucasian Barometer – Georgia*, viewed 17 August 2014 http://www.crrc.ge/oda/?dataset=16&row=167&column=1; Socialbakers Statistics - Georgia Facebook Statistics http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/georgia-2m, see also *Freedom of Internet - Who controls the telecommunication sector in Georgia?* Transparency International Georgia, Tbilisi, February 2013.

blogs), it stands out with pluralism of ideas and absence of one dominant opinion. To compare with the traditional media, social media tends to be less biased and serves as a safeguard of impartiality (Tsuladze, Berzenishvili, Esebua, Kakhidze, Matcharadze & Kvintradze 2012, p. 5).

Unlike the traditional media, much pluralism and interaction available in the social media influence users' identity and behavior construction turning Georgian social media more into enabling environment for self-realization (Tsuladze, Berzenishvili, Esebua, Kakhidze, Matcharadze & Kvintradze, 2012, p.9). According to the study, even those who lack respective social capital, can become opinion leaders or celebrities, provided that they are effectively represented in the social media. Facebook particularly favors the leaders who are capable of influencing wide social media circles (cf. Tsuladze, Berzenishvili, Esebua, Kakhidze, Matcharadze & Kvintradze 2012, p. 8). Another study of the Georgian social network looks at influence of individuals in the social network (Babutsidze, Lomitashvili & Turmanidze, 2013).[21] The youth falling within 17-25 are the biggest group followers of opinion leaders (Babutsidze, Lomitashvili & Turmanidze, 2013, p. 327-28).

The Facebook is the freest space for discussion. According to the respondents, it is social media that creates an enabling environment to discuss the issues that are often avoided by the traditional media including religious, gender or ethnic minority related problems in Georgia (Tsuladze, Berzenishvili, Esebua, Kakhidze, Matcharadze & Kvintradze, 2012, p. 12). 'Social media in Georgia has a function to create a space for reciprocity and expressing protest.'(Tsuladze, Berzenishvili, Esebua, Kakhidze, Matcharadze & Kvintradze 2012, p.12).

Social media changes the way people interact with each other.[22] Under new patterns of interaction cultural traditions are changed or reinvented, while national or religious identities are also altered. It is difficult to imagine that users of the Internet who are now able to access huge body of information do not change their points of view (Tsuladze, Berzenishvili, Esebua, Kakhidze, Matcharadze & Kvintradze, 2012, p.74).

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21 Babutsidze, Lomitashvili & Turmanidze (2013, p. 329) found that "the demographic characteristics of Facebook users in Georgia are similar to those of users in developed, populous and better-researched countries. Young female users dominate Georgian Facebook. Young female users are more active on Facebook. Young females who occupy strategic positions on Georgian Facebook possess disproportionately large power".

22 A new concept of 'friend' created within the social networks has developed as a totally new form relationship. It is assumed that such transformation of connotation of the word may go as far as to influence the cultural level as it intails the changes to the traditional patterns of relationships (Tsuladze,Berzenishvili, Esebua, Kakhidze, Matcharadze & Kvintradze (2012, p. 55).

4   Religion and Young Generation on Facebook: Experiences from a Georgian Case Study

4.1   Methodology

In order to study the affiliation of the youth with religion through Facebook, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. Target group of the study comprised young people from 18 and 26. Overall 169 students were selected for the survey purposes. On the first stage of the research, the researchers followed the respondents on Facebook (observation of the profile) with the purpose to identify the unique forms through which they expressed their interests towards religion or its affiliation and pinpoint dominant trends and characteristics. On the following stage, the research team examined the profile pictures to see if photos/pictures of religious contents (saint, church, the Patriarch, her or his own self in the background of a church) were used as profile pictures, whether or not they liked religious pages, share religious texts and prayers and if yes, how often, congratulates public holidays openly etc.

We were interested to see also to what extent a religious individual uses Facebook as a means for expressing religiosity.

The challenge faced while carrying out the *profile research,* is that in spite of the use of multi methodological approach, there is no guarantee that the material is authentic. As 'having' a Facebook profile means 'creating' one, we share a part of our identity, we construct the desirable and as time passes, Facebook alters our behavior, interests, and standpoint. This is mutual shaping. Therefore, the research and respectively the article only serve to identify trends.

On the second stage the degree of religiosity of the respondents was examined through a questionnaire based on the traditional methods of measuring religiosity (Hill, Peter C & Hood, Ralph W (1999), Norris, P& Inglehart, R (2005) as well as a set of indicators which are deemed important for our research. Our goal was to examine the correlation between online religiosity and/or non-religiosity and offline religiosity (implying religious self-identification or adherence to religious practices). The final stage of the research included in depth interviews with eight students.

It is worth noting that the students at Ilia University represent a specific group among their peers. Campus and urban life, regardless of their original place of residence profoundly influence their identity. Identification of the forms of religiosity in religious youth will allow us to uncover general and specific trends pertaining to the Georgian youth.

4.2   General trends – popularity of religious themes on the Facebook

In general, most of the students consider themselves as religious with only 18% who say they are absolutely nonreligious. Within religious youth the forms of religious self identification vary. Most of them perceive themselves as moderately religious (see Annex 1).

As a response to the question 'to what extent do you consider yourself a religious person', only few indicated that they are very religious (3%), 22% said they are quite religious while 35% assessed their religiosity as moderate. As found out as a result of analysis of the responses, the students implied more of religious practice than their own individual religious perception under the definition of religiosity. 84% of the respondents pray while 34% prays often. A vast majority - 95% said they believe in the existence of God and 89% think there is life after death. A religious expression of one of the respondents can serve as a good example of eclecticism: 's/he perceives herself or himself as Orthodox Christian, but absolutely non-practicing. S/he never attends church, rarely prays but strongly believes in God. S/he has repeatedly experienced moments when God interfered in her/his life'. A respondent, who considers herself or himself as non-religious, is often the one who is non-practicing and has a skeptical attitude towards the Church.

Most of the respondents perceive themselves as moderately religious. Both very religious and moderately religious users choose to express their affiliation with religion mainly through their option of profile pictures of a church, saint, or candles. It is often that posts of a religious person on the Georgian Facebook are very similar to those of clergy's. This is much more than a religious affinity ticked in a questionnaire as an option. The survey analysis show that a very religious user almost always places religious posts, shares quotes from the lives of holey fathers, uploads photos taken during communion and those with priests or shot at the church services.

A practice of sharing 'fortune giving' and wondrous icons among religious and moderately religious users is quite common. Often a call to share is followed by a newly introduced 'ritual explanation' – 'share 10 times to make it come true'. Photos of shrines are also often uploaded. Sharing and uploading chrism oozing icons, profane places with the image of the Mother of God, revelation of a saint or related new rituals also constitutes a part of the common Facebook religiosity. Holy Fool Gabriel Monk (1929 – 1995) still enjoys an enormous popularity among a wider public including the Facebook users. Sharing and uploading quotes, sayings and legends attributed to Father Gabriel is the second most favorite materials to share online after those of the Patriarch Ilia II. The popularity of Father Gabriel has long gone beyond the limits of the Church and reached wider religious audience. After his death in 1995 his grave is always flooded with people who come to his final resting place to ask for support or cure. He was canonized in 2012 by the Georgian Orthodox Church thus institutionalizing his popularity by doing so. A video showing the opening of Father Gabriel's grave and removing his body to the Trinity Cathedral went viral among

the Facebook users in 2014. The social media greatly contributed to spreading the 'sacred footage' of the monk's 'incorrupt body'. However, a group of skeptics, who questioned the authenticity of the viral video, spread another footage via the Internet debunking the belief of the monk's incorruptibility contributing thus to 'de-sacralization' of the whole event. This case clearly demonstrates an immense role the social media can play in the religious event, be it the distribution of a 'magic' or its profanation.

4.3　Few peculiarities of representation of religion on the Facebook

"I like my Patriarch"

One of the specific features of this religious resurgence in Georgia is the upsurge of religiousness at both the individual and institutional level. All recent surveys indicate that the Church is the most trusted public institution (86% approval rate), while the Patriarch is the most respected leader (90%) in Georgia.[23]

Our research corroborates the popularity of the Patriarch in the virtual world. The loyalty towards the Patriarch is mostly expressed through sharing his pictures, extracts from his sermons, or making his photo as profile pictures. The latter caught our great attention. Profile picture is in a way a business card, and if we choose to use an image of a religious leader, saint or a church, it may be considered as one of the forms of religiosity in the modern times. Similarly, one often wears a cross to affiliate with Christianity.

Our research shows that the youth more often share the Patriarch's pictures or his quotes (23%) than posts of other religious content. For example, 18% of the respondents share religious quotes, 12% prefer to share icons, 9% like to share prayers. The Gospel is the least quoted source (4%). The themes related to the Patriarch are the most popular religious topic on Facebook in Georgia. Pictures captioned 'share if you love the Patriarch' are often seen going around among a wide circle of users. Before his departure aboard, users often share photos calling for praying for his health. The Patriarch is a part of public religiosity. His sermons, appeals and official statements are aired on the national TV channels and the news anchors often highlight the major lines of his Sunday sermons. Such a broad medialization of the Patriarch can be labeled as "Eventisierung", a term coined by Knoblauch while referring to the Pope's visits as one of the forms of popular religion.

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23 *Public attitudes towards elections in Georgia: Results of an April 2010.* Survey carried out
by National Democratic Institute (NDI) viewed 15 August 2014
http://www.ndi.org/files/Georgia_Public_Opinion_0410.pdf.

One of the manifestations of the Patriarch's popularity is a trend to like a Facebook page 'I love my Patriarch'. Our research has shown that the page is liked both by religious as well as non-religious users. According to the Social Backer Statistics this Facebook page enjoys one of the most numerous fans. "I like my Patriarch" was a top regional performer 5 times.[24]

Congratulating on the Religious Celebrations - popular form of public religiosity

The research outcomes show that moderately religious users are the most active on Facebook. Responses to the questions as well as of the face to face interviews reveal that quite often very religious individuals choose not to express their religiosity on Facebook or they actively post religious quotes, share the photo of the Patriarch on the initial stage of becoming the users. Eventually, religious themes tend to disappear from their Facebook pages. A 23 year old female student says, as a new user whenever she saw an icon or the Patriarch's photo in her newsfeed, she used to like or share without much consideration: 'I thought if you were a Christian you had to share... Now I tend to think that it is not necessary to expose your religiosity to a wider public... I only congratulate on religious celebrations'. In addition to eventually turning down such manifestation of religiosity, some of the users often undergo changes in their standpoint. Some become critical of the religion or religious institute. As non-religious or less religious respondents say, their and their secular friends' critical attitudes mostly target the recent activities of the Church rather than a religion in general. A 19 year old male student admitted being more religious at school and often posting religious themes on his Facebook page, while after becoming a student his scope of interests have become broader and eventually came to conclusion that he did not want to express his religiosity in such a way.

On average, among the group of religious students the most widespread way of expressing religiosity is liking (61%) to be followed by congratulation posts on religious celebrations (41%). It is worth mentioning that the religious holidays are celebrated by both less religious and even non-religious users. This fact can be explained by the established attitudes towards religious holidays as a part of cultural tradition. If the Easter, Christmas or St. George's day are celebrated among a broader public, religious user congratulates her or his friends on major holidays and saints' days. The recently established tradition is to "ask for forgiveness" before the Easter lent, while in the past such practice would normally take place in the church or face to face with an individual whose forgiveness she or he may seek. This is a practice followed by the user who maintains her or his religiosity beyond the virtual space. What we are dealing with in this particular case is expressing religiosity through a modern medium which does not recognize lines between the public and the private.

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24 *Socialbakers - February 2013 Social Media Report: Facebook Pages in Georgia*, Socialbakers, viewed 26 July 2014, http://www.socialbakers.com/reports/regional/february-2013-social-media-report-facebook-pages-in-georgia <http://www.socialbakers.com>.

A priest as a Facebook friend

Friend lists of Georgian facebook users are long: friends, relatives, acquaintances, people they know virtually. Religious leaders and priests, including the one they choose as their spiritual father, are added to the friend list of religious students. An opinion posted by a priest can get viral very fast. Content of dominant and popular religious posts is a subject of other research, however, we find it worth mentioning that the clergy exposing radical-fundamentalist dispositions are quite active on Facebook. For instance, Facebook became a venue for spreading appeals against the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia by the clergy opposing the demonstration on May 17 2013 in Tbilisi. Similarly, videos showing the priests protesting against the adoption of anti discrimination law by the Parliament of Georgia went viral on the Facebook in 2014. Georgian Facebook has also seen appeals and propaganda led by the Georgian priests against the electronic music festival KaZantip in summer 2014[25]. Facebook activities of the clergy (priests, monks) deserve a separate research. This time we will only focus on the factor as distribution of information on Facebook as the most popular media platform, profoundly influences a broad circle of users.

17% of users (out of 169 observed within the frames of the research) have the representatives of the clergy as Facebook friends. Following up to the videos of the priests is a widespread practice especially among extremely and moderately religious students while the same users very rarely read the Gospel. In those rare cases, when a young respondent said s/he would read the Gospel, we deal with an agnostic (by self-perception) or less religious person. Most of very religious youth (considering themselves as religious) express their religiosity by sharing the Patriarch's photo, quotes from the lives of holey fathers or sharing the videos posted by popular priests (See the chart 3,4,8). The sources of these videos are often their clergy friends on Facebook.

The social network plays a dual role within the Georgian society including our focus group. It is a fastest and the most diversified source for spreading information on religious issues. Therefore, the opinions of radical fundamentalists are often shared by the youth through their Facebook friends, especially when the primary source of these materials is a reputable priest. The same medium gives the youth an opportunity to make themselves familiarized with alternative viewpoints, look at facts critically and simply get to know modern debates in theology that would otherwise be inaccessible.

Facebook as a space of critical religion discourse

The observation on the Facebook profiles has revealed considerable interests towards religion whether it be expressing love and loyalty to the Patriarch, sharing an icon or a specific analysis of the church related issue. 46% of the users compose posts of religious content. Religious themes

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25 The internet is more accessible in the capital therefore making it easier to mobilise radically disposed individuals through the Facebook.

always hit the top ten of the Facebook newsfeed (i.e. Patriarch's epistole critically assessing the surrogate births, participation of the priests in a rally protesting the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia). Religious themes and issues are often the subjects of heated debates on Facebook with many active users participating in it. As we have observed, many users were concerned and angry for supporting the violence by the clergy on May 17 2013. The footages describing the rally on this day got widely spread through the Internet allowing the Facebook users to access authentic materials and get to know what happened in reality while the TV channels showed edited and more neutral materials with little or no aggression shown from the side of the clergy. Disruption of a peaceful demonstration with a number of priests acting as aggressors played a critical role to change the climate on the Facebook ultimately resulting in removing a taboo over the critics of the Church. In general, the Facebook is the venue, which hosts an open critic of the Church. The major reasons for the critical attitudes are lack of engagement of the institute in social and charity activities, intransparent financial transactions and operations, possession of expensive luxury cars by the priest, behavior suggesting intolerance and non-Christian views by some of the priests.

The third group of the respondents, who consider themselves as non-religious, are active on the Facebook. They actively participate in debates around religious issues. The Facebook in Georgia represents the broadest and freest venue for discussion the religious issues characterized with expressing one's viewpoint in much more emotional and expressive manner.

In 2014 a video showing the opening of Father Gabriel's grave and removing his body to the Trinity Cathedral went viral among the Facebook users. The social media greatly contributed to spreading the 'sacred footage' of the monk's 'incorrupt body'. However, a group of skeptics, who questioned the authenticity of a viral video, spread another footage via the Internet debunking the belief of the monk's incorruptibility contributing thus to 'de-sacralization' of the whole event. The students shared their opinions on this matter. A 23 year old female student says that a debate about 'incorruptibility' has had a negative effect on her. She refused to go to the Cathedral thinking that if she truly believes, the Saint will always protect her. A long line of parishioners poses a stronger barrier. Another student told us she had gone to see the body of the Monk as all her friends did so; however, she did not like the sharing of the videos on Facebook.

5   Conclusion

In today's Georgia religion has vast influence on various spheres of public life. The Church and religious leaders are actively involved in a public discourse. Religion has penetrated a public space:

religious issues are discussed in public debates, political discourse, excessive highlights of the religious issues by the media, religious symbols in pop culture.

Having occupied a new public space, religion has now become an integral part both of offline and online worlds. A juncture of religion and digital media influences religion itself and the forms of religious identification as well as shapes the behavior and viewpoint of the Internet users.

The present article attempted to identify the forms of the religious affiliation emerged through the interaction of religion and the Facebook based on the cases of the most frequent social media users – the youth. The research has shown that visibility of religion in real life is also reflected on a social network. For most users of the Facebook it is a part of everyday life to interact with religious themes in the virtual world. Both religious and less religious users like/share and prescribe to religious pages and congratulate on religious celebrations. This is a minimum of expressing "public religiosity on the Facebook". Sometimes people express their affiliation more intensely on the Facebook than in real life. Those who say that they attend the church only on religious celebrations are the ones who often post religious contents. This frequency is very well tuned up with the character of the facebook - you not only compose your post, but also unintentially come across with religious texts shared by even nonreligious pages. Affinity of the youth with the religious themes is supported by dais supported by the virtual world, the Facebook friends, groups/pages, opinion makers active in social made while more traditional spheres of socialization - family and school - play diminished role.

The Georgian Facebook society is saturated with the religion expressed in the forms of icons, prayers, church songs sharing or writing a critical post about the Church. Most of the youth is not ignorant of the religions themes and the latter is important for both religious and non-religious users of the Facebook. It reflects the transformation process going within the society - heated debates on the role of religion for a public.

The Patriarch enjoys popularity in the virtual space. It's this popularity that bears the trends of a popular religion. Both very religious and less religious persons express their loyalty towards the Patriarch. The dates related to him (his angel's day, the day of enthronement and his birthday) and the quotes attributed to him are popular. In the offline space the popularity is expressed by putting up his photos at homes, in public transport, in the offices of the public servants. His photos are often used as a cover photo of a mobile phone. Stories get viral through media means and these stories are often distracted from the reality. The Facebook has given a rise to a new 'rites' – every time the Patriarch departs to seek medical treatment abroad, users start sharing special prayer and call on others to pray for the Patriarch's wellbeing. A prayer as a religious act has acquired a set of new rules as a result of its interaction with the new media. An important part of a preparation for the

Easter's lent, is the Forgiveness day which has abandoned a private space and moved to public and virtual sphere. Through the Facebook a religious person publicly asks for forgiveness.

Based on our research we can single out three distinct groups of the students: a) very religious b) moderately religious and c) non-religious students. The second group of moderately religious students is the largest and most eclectic group of the respondents. The diversity found within this group is determined by the difficulty of definition of religiosity. This group consists of the students for whom religion is related to regular religious practice and those who prefer individual feelings. Another sub-group consists of those who believe religion has purely national and cultural importance. Its members publicly express their religiosity and use the Facebook for this purpose. Another sub-group of the members only choose to congratulate others on religious celebrations. To determine whether or not sharing the Patriarch's photo indicates to the user's special attitude towards him or it is the act of simply 'clicking on a like button' (as one of the students puts it) can be a complicated task. The members of this group attach vast significance to the cultural importance of religion and to expressing religiosity with popular forms. It was within this very group that the biggest difference between Facebook and real religiosity was observed. Namely, the users belonging to this group tend to express their religiosity online more often than in real life. The reasons behind this practice may lie in a generally widespread trend of religious affiliation on the Facebook. Influenced by this trend, a user to tries to establish themselves this way. Secondly, religion is the most favorite and close theme for users and therefore it is more comfortable and acceptable to share related posts. The third reason may be the convenience attached to virtual practices rather than to the traditional religious practice. It is worth noting that this aspect requires more in-depth analysis while our conclusions in the present paper rest upon the motivations of the students at Ilia State University. The third groups of non-religious students belong to users' active group. The group unites atheists, agnostics and those believers who dare to criticize the Church wanting to distance themselves from the Church as an institute. Their Facebook image was consistent with their attitudes towards the religion in real life.

Diversity within the students in regards with the religion is determined by the fact that the target group consisted of the students of one of the country's leading universities. Campus life and urban lifestyle, better Internet accessibility heavily influences their worldview. The diversity within the attitudes towards religion reflects the socio-cultural transformation ongoing in the younger generation.

Facebook tracks the changes in students' attitudes towards expressing religiosity publicly. There are cases when the religious posts and statuses of the previous years considerably differ from the recent ones. We were interested to find out whether or not this was a random or occasional change, however, as revealed the reasons behind these changes varied. One of the respondents said s/he changed an attitude towards religion in real life too becoming more questioning. The other

respondent told us her attitude remained the same, but she simply had chosen not to 'talk to every single person about posts, prayers ... but she occasionally shares the Patriarch's quotes'. The respondents are influenced both real public and the Facebook users as well.

Facebook is characterized with pluralism and freedom. According to our research, it supports the distribution of critical thinking about religion, alleviation of taboos and secularization. Facebook in Georgia is saturated with discussions and debates about religion. The nature of the social media allows religious groups to have daily and intensive contact with their parishioners, disseminate the Patriarch's sermons, religious publications, lives of saints. It reinforces loyalty, knowledge and the ownership among the believers. Facebook serves as an effective venue allowing its users to self-identity themselves with the religion they follow. The same medium is the means for spreading radical religious thoughts favoring fundamentalist groups and religious leaders to disseminate the material and mobilize large groups without any institutional support. This dialectics characterizes any new technology. The same virtual space contributes to lifting off the taboo on and de-sacralization of religious issues. The Facebook in Georgia represents a platform whereby a different opinion is freely voiced and a critical judgment, including on religious issues, is freely shared. This cannot be qualified as resacralization of religion. It supports the process of secularization and as the new technology has not diminished sacrality. It can be assumed that the religion has found a new form and occupied a new virtual space. The new media has reinforced the expression of traditional religiosity and also supported a popular religion and demystify of the world. Religion has become more public, digital and visible. In Georgian reality, considering historic and modern socio-political changes, transformation of religion is manifested in a full range. Thus, strengthening institutional religion (the Church) is coupled with establishing new forms of individual religiosity.

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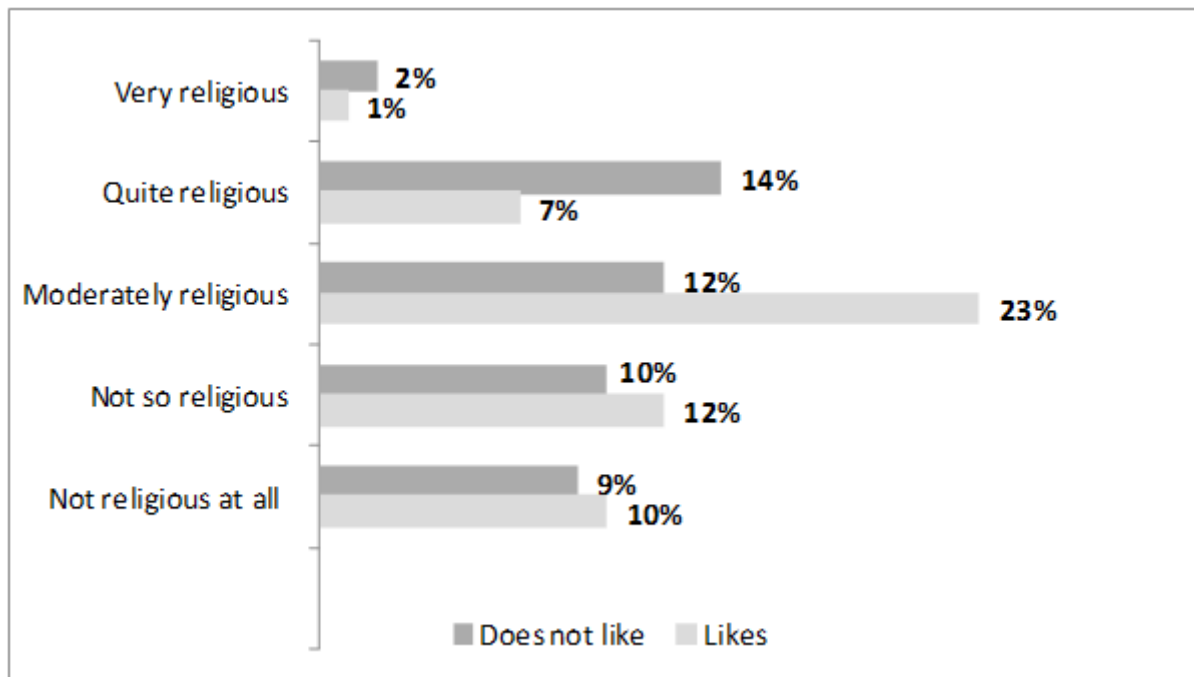
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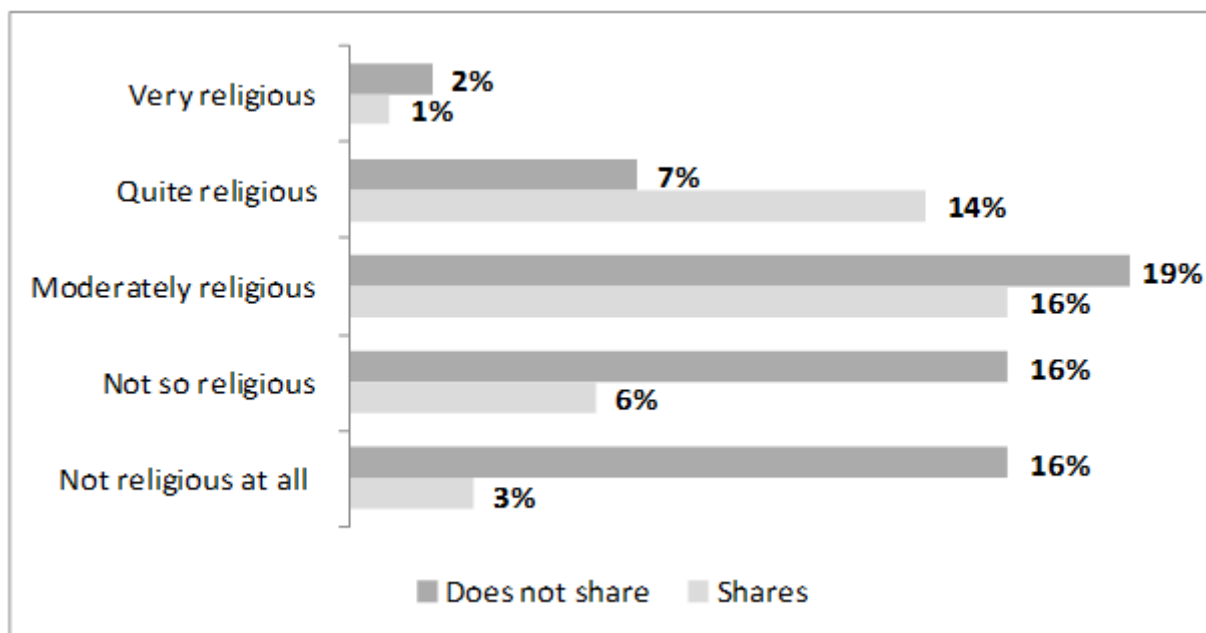
Appendix

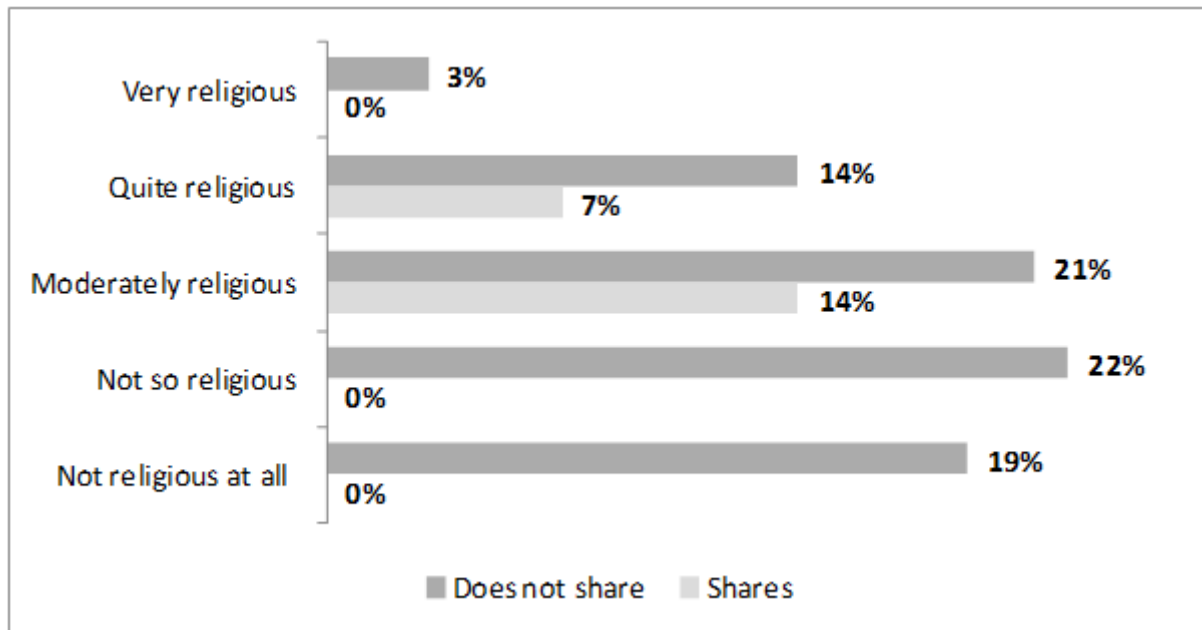### 1. Do you consider yourself religious?
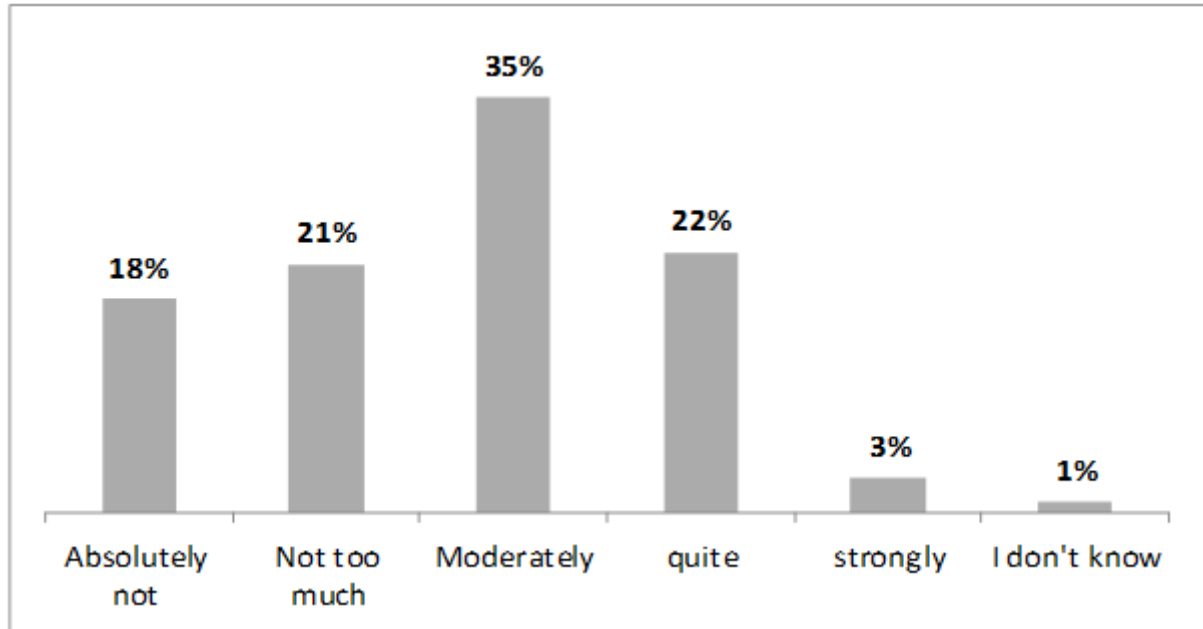
2. Perception of self-religiosity/Likes the pages
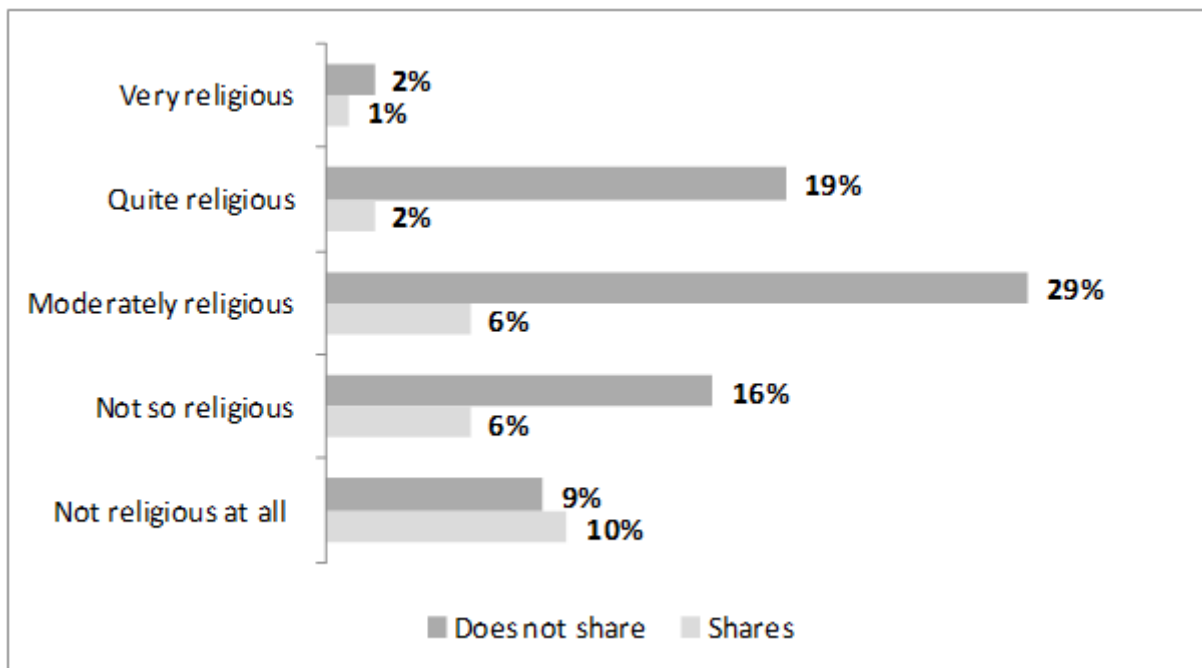

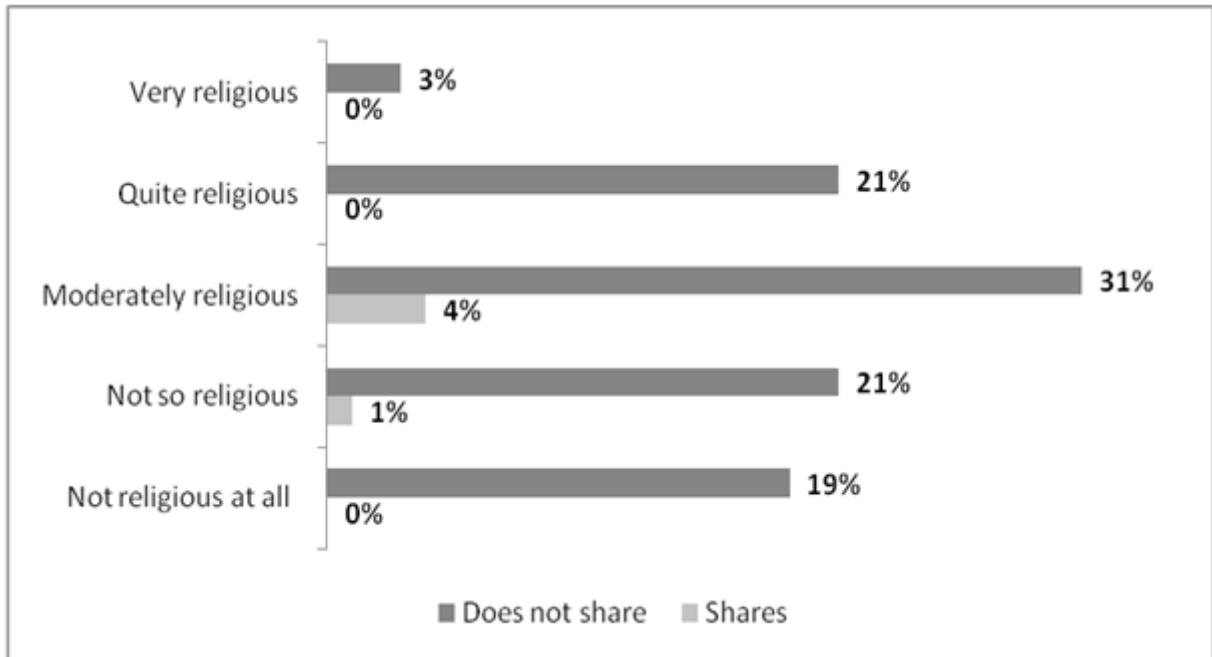## *3. Perception of self religiosity/Shares posts of religious content*

4. Perception of self religiosity/Shares the Patriarch's photos and quotes
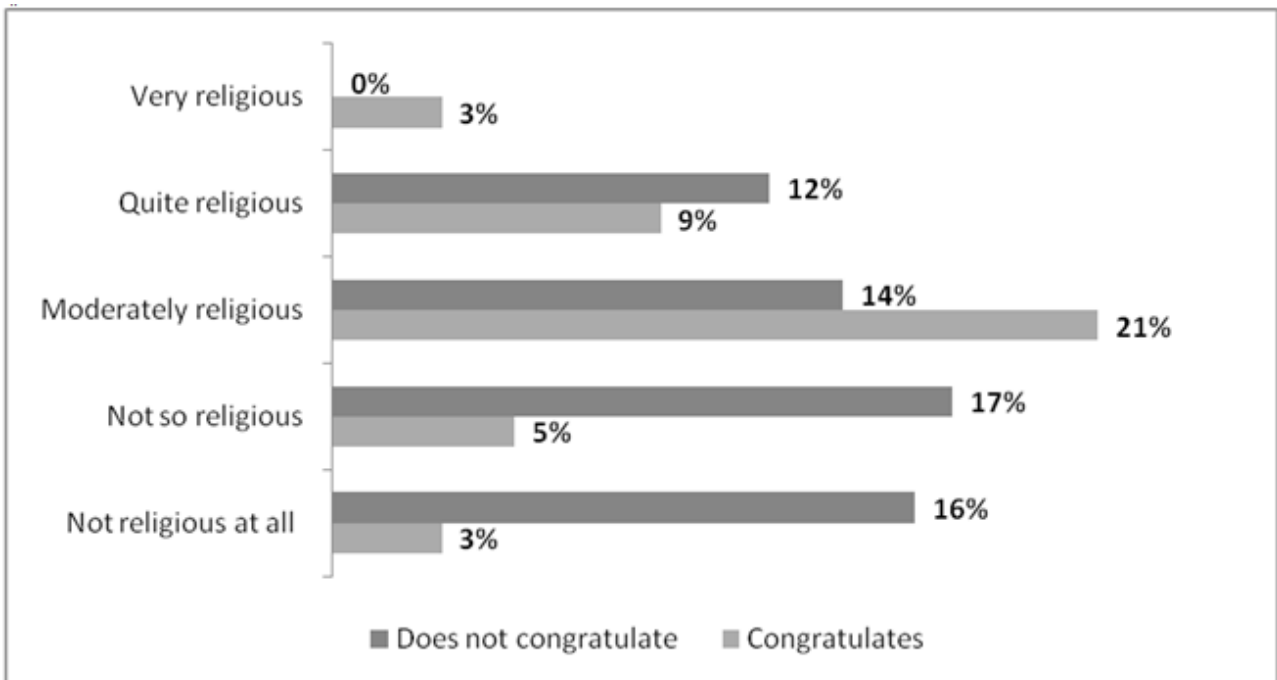

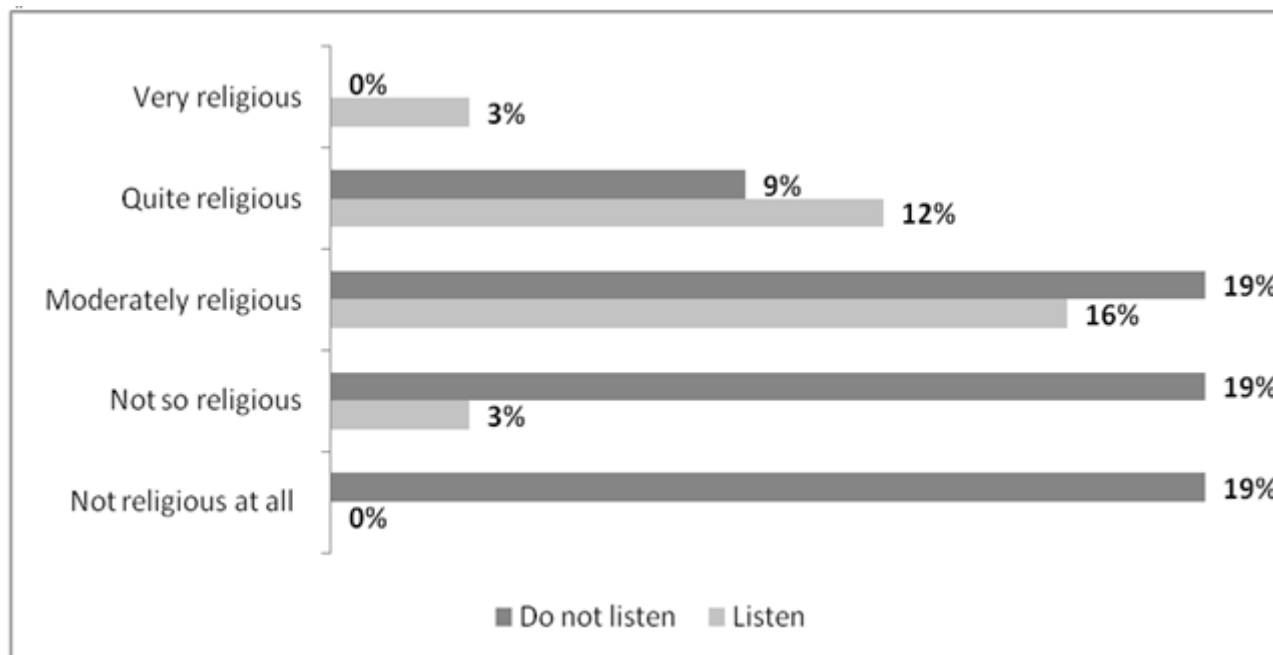*5. Perception of self religiosity/Whether or not shares posts criticizing religion*

6. Perception of self religiosity/Shares or posts quotes from the Gospel

7. Perception of self religiosity/Congratulates on religious celebrations/holidays

8. Perception of self religiosity/Do you listen to sermons on the YouTube?

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