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GEORGIA: Can religious minorities publish religious literature?

By Felix Corley, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

The Salvation Army, True Orthodox Church, and Pentecostals have told Forum 18 News Service that they cannot print religious literature in Georgia, as publishers refuse to accept it without the blessing of the Orthodox Patriarchate. Giorgi Andriadze, parliamentary secretary of the Orthodox Patriarchate denies that it has any influence over what publishers may produce. "They can publish what they like," he told Forum 18. Tamaz Papuashvili, of the State Chancellery, told Forum 18 that his office has received complaints about the difficulty of printing religious literature, but says Protestants and others should simply ignore the Patriarchate. "They know perfectly well that the Patriarchate is not a state organ." Latin-rite Catholics, Assyrian Chaldean Catholics, Yezidis, and Baptists have not encountered problems in printing publications.

Several religious minority leaders have complained to Forum 18 News Service that they cannot print religious literature in Georgia, as publishers refuse to accept it without the blessing of the Orthodox Patriarchate, while literature they try to import is barred or confiscated by the customs service (see F18News 20 November 2003 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=192). "Literature published in Georgia must be placed by the Orthodox Church," an official of the Salvation Army told Forum 18. "Not officially, but this is how it works."

Giorgi Andriadze, parliamentary secretary of the Orthodox Patriarchate denies that it has any influence over what publishers may produce. "They can publish what they like," he told Forum 18 from Tbilisi on 20 November. "A lot of literature that I personally consider harmful is published." He stresses that there is no censorship in Georgia and says publishers themselves decide what to produce. "It is not pleasant for us when other faiths distribute their literature, but we don't have the right to stop them. No-one can say the Patriarchate is banning literature of other faiths."

"Publishers understand that the Patriarchate has authority over all publishing activity," one diplomat told Forum 18 in Tbilisi on condition of anonymity. The diplomat, who has been involved in printing locally on behalf of the embassy, said three separate local publishers had volunteered this.

Tamaz Papuashvili, head of the Religion and National Development Department of the State Chancellery, said that his office has received complaints about the difficulty of printing religious literature, but says Protestants and others should simply ignore the Patriarchate. "They know perfectly well that the Patriarchate is not a state organ," he told Forum 18 on 6 November. "Whatever the Patriarchate says is not a state order." He stressed that there are many private printing houses and claimed that the Patriarchate is not bothered if other groups do publish literature.

Fr Gela Aroshvili of the True Orthodox Church told Forum 18 they tried to print a book last year with a large publishing house, but it refused as they did not have the blessing of the Patriarchate (he said this had happened before the government and Patriarchate signed a concordat in October 2002). He said they now print books quietly in private companies, who do not identify themselves as the printers in the books. "The workers often don't know we're not from the Patriarchate – it's Orthodox literature after all," Fr Aroshvili joked.

Pentecostal pastor Nikolai Kalutsky pointed out that publishers also fear mob violence from self-styled Orthodox vigilantes if they print literature for religious minorities. Two years ago Old Calendarist priest Basil Mkalavishvili led a raid on a commercial printers that had previously published Protestant literature. "It would be a waste of money for us to try to print as mobs would find out and destroy it," he told Forum 18.

Pastor Mamuka Jebisashvili of the Word of Life Pentecostal church – which also cannot print literature - likewise recounted a Mkalavishvili raid in December 2001 when religious literature was stolen.

Some communities have encountered no problems. Bishop Giuseppe Pasotto, head of the Latin-rite Catholic community, told Forum 18 his Church had published books, calendars and a newspaper in Georgian without any problem. "We don't ask permission from the Patriarchate." Fr Benny Yadgar, priest of the Assyrian Chaldean Catholic parish, told Forum 18 he had published several works without problems, including a multi-lingual Assyrian service book in 1998 and an Assyrian language primer earlier this year. Both state clearly that they are church publications.

Likewise Agit Mirzoev and Dmitri Pirbari of the Yezidi Kurdish community said they had published several brochures in Russian and Kurdish on the essence of the Yezidi faith.

Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili, head of the Baptist Church, believes there are no problems eventually finding a printer prepared to accept religious literature. "There is a free market," he told Forum 18 in Tbilisi on 7 November. "If one publisher refuses to take it you can always find another." He cited the examples of the Bible Society and the Pentecostal Church which, he said, printed literature without problems.

However, he noted that religious minorities have no access to the media, whether state-run or private. "Talking about religion or the churches is taboo," he declared. He cited the example of a young journalist who told him that her chief editor had warned her that three subjects are taboo: casinos, drug-dealing and religion. He said his Baptist Church had never been able to print an article in any of the major papers. "We are told they cannot publish anything on religion without the blessing of their spiritual fathers. Each paper has one."

Pastor Jebisashvili of Word of Life complained that only Orthodox priests appear on television – and a Baptist representative only once. "We're never invited," he told Forum 18. Fr Aroshvili said his Church's news or views can never appear on television or in the press. "If a journalist is interested in writing about us they send the article to the Patriarchate for approval – and don't get permission. The article doesn't appear."

"Checking articles with the Patriarchate is not official policy, but most journalists do it," Levan Ramishvili, head of the Liberty Institute, told Forum 18. "It's a form of censorship, or self-censorship." He said if an article is critical of the Patriarchate a journalist would be pressured to soften it.

Despite the evidence, Andriadze denies that the Patriarchate checks articles. "We don't have the right," he insisted. "No editor ever brings articles to the Patriarchate for checking. Maybe they are Orthodox themselves and don't want to publish articles about other faiths."

Nor are religious minorities allowed to advertise their events. Giorgi Salarishvili, an associate officer of the Salvation Army, told Forum 18 that when they phoned state-owned Channel 1 television to find out the costs of advertising the group's anniversary celebrations to mark 10 years in Georgia, due at the end of November, they were told that they would have to get the blessing of the Patriarchate before the station would accept their advertisements. (END)

A printer-friendly map of Georgia is available at

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=georgi>

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