

Georgian Priests Should Remember Jesus' Words

By [Paul Rimple](#)

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The charitable State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic, or SOCAR, has begun providing free gas to some 200 churches throughout Georgia at a value of about \$600,000. While it is still unclear whether Armenian churches will also be recipients of this giveaway, we do know the Georgian Orthodox Church will benefit the most from the donation, as it is Georgia's dominant religious institution. And it needs all the charity it can get.

When the Georgian government drafted its constitution after independence in 1991, lawmakers opted for a secular state, although they officially recognized the role of the Georgian Orthodox Church in the country's history. Meanwhile, the country was reeling from a national awakening where being Georgian meant being a Georgian Orthodox Christian. As fate would have it, the country self-destructed along ethnic lines — deaf, blind and dumb to the teachings of Christ.

And if the civil and separatist wars weren't lesson enough, Georgian Orthodox clerics

continued to harass and attack religious minorities even after 2002, when President Eduard Shevardnadze granted the church full ownership of its assets and made it the only legal church in Georgia. Every other church had to register as a civil organization.

In 2005, the government of President Mikheil Saakashvili put two priests behind bars for violently leading attacks against "nontraditional" faiths, which quelled the zealotry for the time being. In 2011, Saakashvili reformed the civil code and gave religious minorities legal status, to the chagrin of the church, which pooh-poohed the fact that the same government had also continually increased church funding from \$80,000 in 2005 to \$15.8 million in 2009.

The generosity did not stop there. The Interior Ministry gave the patriarchy a \$150,000 Mercedes-Benz, Tbilisi City Hall donated 700 tons of wine and the state gave the church valuable property across the country for free or the symbolic price of 1 lari (60 cents). This was all taxpayer money.

I am curious if the priests driving black Land Cruisers see the irony that more than one-third of Georgians live below the minimum subsistence level. In September, the Georgian patriarch gave Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, one of the wealthiest men in the world, a \$22,000 wristwatch. Couldn't he have just blessed him?

Perhaps the patriarch should remember Jesus' words: "If you want to be perfect, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven."

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