NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

In Ossetia, could religion be part of the solution?

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 21, 2008 All Things Catholic

Few analysts so far seem to have noticed, but the crisis *du jour* in the Caucasus, this time focusing on the tiny breakaway Georgian province of South Ossetia, may be most remarkable for what it's not. For once in this volatile part of the world, religion does not appear to be a driving force in the conflict.

Hence the obvious, if largely unasked, question: If religion isn't the problem, can it be part of the solution?

It's a challenge above all for the world's estimated 275 million Eastern Orthodox Christians, but how they resolve it could have important implications for Catholics too. Both Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI have placed a "preferential option" for the Orthodox at the heart of their ecumenical hopes, which means that the fate of the Orthodox inevitably affects the Catholic future.

The clash between Russia and Georgia over South Ossetia is not akin to Russia's difficulties in Chechnya, or to the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, or to tensions between Serbia and Kosovo, because the animosities in Ossetia do not break down along Christian/Muslim lines. Nor is it analogous to the bloodshed that devastated the Balkans in the 1990s, which pitted Catholic Slovenia and Croatia against Orthodox Serbia. In the Ossetian conflict, all parties are Orthodox Christians.

In fact, this is the first instance since World War II in which one majority Orthodox nation has gone to war against another. Both Alexy II, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, and Ilia II, Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia, have cited the Orthodox-on-Orthodox nature of the violence as especially tragic.

"Today blood is being shed and people are perishing in South Ossetia, and my heart deeply grieves over it," Alexy II said in a statement released last week. "Orthodox Christians are among those who have raised their hands against each other. Orthodox peoples, called by the Lord to live in fraternity and love, are in conflict."

In an Aug. 10 sermon, Ilia II struck a similar note.

"God is with us and the Virgin Mary is protecting us," he said, "but one thing concerns us very deeply: that Orthodox Russians are bombing Orthodox Georgians."

To be sure, not all the combatants are the same kind of Orthodox. When South Ossetia asserted de facto

autonomy from Georgia after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, many of the Orthodox in the region opted to affiliate with the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia. Today, those Ossetians belong to the fiercely anti-ecumenical "True Orthodox Church," while others look to the Moscow patriarchate led by Alexy. The Georgian Orthodox Church likewise regards South Ossetia as part of its canonical territory.

Moreover, the relationship between the Russian and Georgian Orthodox churches has not always been peaches and cream. Jesuit Fr. Robert Taft, of Rome's Pontifical Oriental Institute, points out that the Georgian Orthodox Church was forcibly absorbed by Moscow in 1811 after Russia annexed Georgia in 1801. A Russian metropolitan was appointed in place of the Georgian Catholicos, and Slavonic was imposed as the liturgical language. The Georgians only regained ecclesiastical independence after the Russian Revolution in 1917.

Yet there's little indication that those fissures have played much role in the current violence, and believers on all sides generally regard themselves as part of one Orthodox communion.

Paul Crego, an expert on Orthodoxy who archives Georgian and Armenian language material for the Library of Congress, told me that in recent times, relations between the Russian and Georgian churches have been quite close. Part of that, he said, is a personal bond between the two patriarchs; Ilia came to power in 1977, Alexy in 1990, so they've come to know one another well. Their friendship seems to have survived recurrent tensions between their respective nations. For example, in March 2007 Ilia II became the first Georgian to fly from Tbilisi to Moscow, at the invitation of Alexy II, after Russia had imposed an embargo on flights a year earlier in the wake of the arrest of four Russians in Georgia on charges of espionage.

The Russian and the Georgian Orthodox also share a basic theological conservatism and a suspicion of Western-style ecumenism. The Georgian Orthodox Church, for example, pulled out of the World Council of Churches and the European Council of Churches in 1997.

Kinship between the two churches may help explain a striking feature of the current conflict: It's the first time in recent memory in which the Russian army has gone to war without the explicit endorsement of the Russian Orthodox leadership.

That new tone raises the question of whether Alexy and Ilia could play a peace-making role, helping their two Orthodox nations find common ground. There's precedent on the Catholic side for such an initiative; early in the papacy of John Paul II, the Vatican helped two majority Catholic nations, Chile and Argentina, pull back from the brink of war over the disputed Beagle Islands. Alas, there's no outside Orthodox leader of sufficient standing who might mediate. The Patriarch of Constantinople, for example, is theoretically first among equals in the Orthodox world, but given tensions between Constantinople and Moscow over the status of Orthodox churches in Estonia and Ukraine, many Russians would likely see Bartholomew I as biased.

If Orthodoxy is going to make a stand, it will probably have to come from Alexy and Ilia themselves. Taft says Alexy II may be especially well positioned to exert such influence.

"Alexy has enormous prestige in Russia now. He's certainly the major religious authority in this dispute," Taft said. "Russian Orthodoxy has been rebuilt under his leadership, and he has strong ties to the population, as well as to intellectuals and government figures."

If Orthodox prelates were to seize the moment, such an effort could have wide implications.

Nationalism, as is well known, has long been the Achilles' heel of Orthodoxy. Each Orthodox church is tightly identified with its own culture, language and people, so much so that Orthodox leaders often find it difficult to do anything other than axiomatically bless the actions of the state. South Ossetia arguably provides the best opportunity in a long time for Orthodox leaders to break free of this exaggerated nationalism. If an Orthodox patriarch is ever going to raise a critical voice, however diplomatically and gently, against the use of armed force by his own country, now is the time.

Why should Catholics care?

Aside from the obvious interest in promoting peace, there's also an ecumenical angle. At present, Catholic-Orthodox relations are frequently held hostage to political interests in majority Orthodox states. If a pro-Western regime comes to power, then ecumenism is usually encouraged; when the political winds shift, the Orthodox often feel pressure to pull back. Putting some space between church and state could insulate ecumenical relations from this kind of turbulence.

For the most part, there's little the Catholic church, or the Vatican, can do to promote such a result, at least directly. Given the anti-Roman humor of much grass-roots Orthodox opinion, any perception that Alexy and Ilia were acting in tandem with the pope would be a disaster. On Aug. 10, Benedict XVI appealed for peace "in the name of our common Christian heritage"; a week later, he called for a cease-fire, the opening of humanitarian corridors, and engagement from the international community. For now, that's probably as far as he can go.

Papal verbiage, however, is not the only tool in the Catholic toolbox. While Alexy and Ilia will have to take the lead, the Vatican can help make sure the world is paying attention if they do. *L'Osservatore Romano* and Vatican Radio can inject statements and initiatives from Orthodox leaders into Western conversation. Vatican diplomats can make sure that their opposite numbers in foreign ministries are as aware of any "Alexy-Ilia" effort, however indirect or behind-the-scenes, as they are of the "Sarkozy-Medvedev" plan. In turn, that attention, and the positive response it would almost certainly elicit in global opinion, could embolden Alexy, Ilia, and other key Orthodox leaders to press even harder. More basically, Catholic leaders can encourage prayer and solidarity with their fellow Orthodox Christians.

Depending on how things develop, South Ossetia could mark a historical turning point for Orthodoxy, providing it with a new measure of independence and moral authority. For reasons both humanitarian and practical, it's a consummation devoutly to be wished.

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