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Why Georgians Are Now Talking of Homophobia

By Paul Rimple

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Beso stopped by the house last week. His dark eyes looked heavier than usual. "I'm so ashamed to be Georgian. If I could, I would leave this country and never come back."

Beso was referring to the May 17 pogrom against gay rights activists, when dozens of Georgian Orthodox priests led thousands of rabid philistines through the streets of downtown Tbilisi in search of gay prey to sacrifice in the name of the Lord, who they believe is a traditional Georgian.

"I don't like gays," Beso admitted. "I think it's sick, but what the Church did was wrong. It was not Georgian."

For Beso, a working class hero, being Georgian means being tolerant and hospitable. Christian values are human values. You can be an atheist, Muslim, Jehovah's Witness or gay and be Georgian. Although he's got issues with homosexuality, like many straight people do, he

knows that "gayness" is not a disease and poses no threat to Georgian traditions or its demographics. Beso, like many Georgians, despises hypocrisy.

Thanks to the psychotic overreaction of the church two weeks ago, people are now talking openly about homosexuality and a corrupt, power-hungry church, two topics that had been strictly taboo. In a most eloquent 5,700-word sermon in the Tbilisi magazine Tabula, Beka Mindiashvili takes on the sanctimony of the Georgian Orthodox Church and charges that - Patriarch Illa II is guilty of the deadly sin of pride by allowing himself to be a "monumental idol before the Georgian people."

The church overstepped itself when it decided to go secular and tell the government who it should and should not allow to exercise their democratic rights guaranteed by the constitution. It severely weakened itself by condoning the attacks as more Georgians are saying they deplore the violence and for the first time are saying they want to take back their church from the zealots that control it.

So far, two priests have been charged for riot-related offenses that carry a maximum of two years imprisonment. While more deserve to face the music, it's at least a start. Maybe now people won't be afraid to ask priests, who take an oath of humility, why they drive expensive cars.

The handful of activists that came out that fateful May day thought they were just going to speak out against homophobia. Instead, they showed the world who truly is morally right.

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