

## Twenty Centuries of Christianity in Georgia

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### Abstract

The paper traces history of spreading Christianity in Georgia since the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, showing its significance for making the Georgian nation.

Based on historic sources the story includes the legends linked to the process. Taking into consideration scholarly literature the paper dates proclaiming Christianity in Georgia back to 326, considering the issue of autocephalous movement of the Georgian Church. History of the Georgian Church embraces contribution of the leaders in the different times.

**Keywords:** *Christianity, Church, autocephaly, martyr, integrity, nation, state.*

At the end of the first millennium B.C. the Savior, Son of God, Jesus Christ born of the Virgin Mary, a descendant of the Jewish King David, was sent to humankind. Christ was baptized by John the Baptist in the river Jordan. But the Jewish people failed to acknowledge him, they did not believe in his divine origin, and the clergymen sentenced him to death with the approval of the Roman governor Pilate. On the third day after the crucifixion and death Christ resurrected.

Georgia had also been awaiting a Savior-Messiah. The book of Nebrot which the first Georgian King Mirian had, reads: "On the very last day there will come the owner of heaven to see you suffering in grief and will save you"<sup>1</sup>. According to the Georgian historical tradition, Holy Fathers from Georgia Elioze Mtskheteli and Longinoz Karsneli, being invited to Jerusalem, witnessed the Crucifixion of the Lord. The Crucifixion was rather difficult for Elioze's mother to bear. Elioze's sister died in Mtskheta while holding Christ's tunic and was buried with the relic<sup>2</sup>. Today, the place remains in the foundation of the Svetitskhoveli ("life-giving pillar") Church. Referring to historical sources, it is to be noted that the great relic of the Old Testament, Prophet Ilia's mantle was also kept in Mtskheta, and Khobi monastery kept the Virgin's robe, which is now protected and kept in the Museum of Zugdidi. According to the Christian ecclesiastical tradition, the Tsilkani Church had an icon of the Mother of God created by Luke the Evangelist. Today it is kept in Georgia in the National Museum of Art.

Christianity spread in Georgia in the 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. After the Ascension the Apostles cast lots as to who would preach Christianity in the countries. Georgia was the Holy Virgin's lot, for which reason we call Georgia "Khvtsismshobli tsilkhvedri", which means "destined to Theotokos". But obeying her Son's will, the Holy Virgin sent Andrew the First-Called to Georgia. The Holy Virgin gave him her divine icon. This icon is known as Atskuri Virgin's icon and is kept in the National Museum of Art. Simeon the Cananite and Matthias came to Georgia together with Andrew the First-Called. The first episcopacy in Georgia was established by Andrew the First-Called in Atskuri; he also assigned the first bishop, several priests and a deacon.

The church founded by the Apostles should have been autocephalous,

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which means “sovereign”. This notwithstanding, the autocephaly of the Georgian Church has always been a disputable issue causing many difficulties, and it had to be proved by different scholars throughout its history.

The Apostle Andrew visited Georgia three times. His third journey was particularly interesting as he was accompanied by Christ's disciples: the Apostles Simon the Cananite and Matthias. The Apostle Andrew came to “Trapzon, the country of Megreles”. When the apostles came to the town-fortress Apsaros (at present, Gonio), Matthias died and was buried there. At the place where the icon of the Mother of God was given some rest, a spring sparkled itself out of the ground. Later on, the Holy Virgin Church was built there and the first copy of the icon of the Mother of God was deposited there. Simon the Cananite died in Abkhazia. His grave is in "Nikopsia", Nova Mikhailovka, to the north-west of Tuapse. In the 14<sup>th</sup> 15<sup>th</sup> centuries the remains of Simon the Cananite were reburied in Anakopia, presently located in New Athos.

Notwithstanding the signs of the first Christian communities and shrines found in the areas, which testify to the existence of religion and christening in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries, Christianity was not an official state religion in Georgia until the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Escavated ruins of a church in Nastagisi dated from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century shed light on the appearance of a new religion in the territory.

The last persecution of Christians started during the reign of Caesar Diocletian (284-305), when the Commander of the Roman Army George of Cappadocia was tortured and canonized. There are many churches built and sanctified in the name of St. George in Georgia.

In 298, under a treaty concluded by Rome and Sassanid Persia in Nissibin, the Kartli Kingdom appeared to be under the Roman political control enabling the authorities to acknowledge Christianity. King Mirian is the first Christian king, and a preacher of that time is Nino of Cappadocia, whose father was Zabilon, a well-known Roman commander, and whose mother was Susana, the sister of the bishop of Jerusalem. Nino is one of those who escaped from Diocletian to find a shelter in Armenia. The Armenian king Trdat sentenced to death those women who were devoted to Christ. Nino was among them, but she was saved by God's will and sent to Kartli, since God told her that “there was a lot to reap, but few workers”<sup>3</sup>.

The Georgian historic literature confirms the fact that St. Nino came to Kartli in 303-311. Near Lake Paravani she had a vision in her dream: “a man gave her a sealed book and told her to give it to a pagan king of Mtskheta”. Later Nino settled in Mtskheta preaching Christianity and healing insane and suffering people. Among her first listeners and followers was the queen of Kartli Nana, who had been cured from an incurable disease by St. Nino.

In 313, the Edict of Milan ceased persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire, and Christianity gained equal rights alongside pagan beliefs. In 324 Christianity became the state religion by the order of Constantine the Great (306-337).

There is certain evidence to prove that Georgians were involved in the creation of the Christian creed. Bishop Stratophilus of Bichvinta attended the first Ecumenical Council held in Nicea and the Bishop of Kartli Pantophilus attended

the second Ecumenical Council. The Christian churches in Bichvinta, Nokalakevi built in the 4<sup>th</sup> century in western Georgia also attest to the spreading of Christian religion in southern and eastern Black Sea regions.

There are many oral versions and texts connected with declaring Christianity as an official state religion in Georgia. One of them tells of solar eclipse when King Mirian was hunting on Tkhoti Mountain and was only saved after mentioning Nino's God. This led to the establishing Christianity as the official state religion in Kartli, and later on in Egrisi (Lazica) in the same year. This decision for Georgia, situated at the crossroads between the West and the East, implied taking political orientation towards the West, while two strong superpowers, Rome and Sassanid Persia, were rivaling for world domination. The decision determined Georgia's further fate and strongly tied the Georgian people and the Georgian culture to western civilization. Kartli started building churches and initially masons from the Roman Empire were invited. Constantine the Great, the Roman Emperor, sent to Georgia not only priests, deacons and stone masters led by Bishop John, but he also sent to the Georgian king a fragment of the cross, a piece of footboard and nails on which Christ was crucified. Because of their special importance, many kings contributed significantly in keeping there holy relics or taking them to another place, maintaining or getting them back.

A wooden church constructed in the king's garden, which was later called "Svetitskhoveli" ("the life-giving pillar"), was meant to be a principall church in Georgia.

Kartli declared Christianity as the state religion in 326. However, the christening of Georgia was a fairly long process. The Georgian Church is inseparable from the world church, and all Christians are one whole, one spiritual body with Christ as the head, "one body and one spirit, one God, one faith, one baptism, one Lord and a Father of all".

Bishop John baptized Kartli's noblemen at a special place on the bank of the Mtkvari river. Common people were christened down the river by priests and deacons. St. Nino, Bishop John and lords were baptizing people in different parts of Georgia showing them the "true way" with the "New Testament and the Holy Cross". Finally, St. Nino settled in Bodbe, where she became fatally ill and died. Before her death she told everything about her life to Mirian's daughter-in-law, the wife of Revi, Salome Ujarmeli, and Perozhavr Sivnieli. Their accounts of the events together with the narrations of Abiatari and Sydonia became the basis for the "Life of St. Nino", one of ancient texts about the conversion of Kartli. The "Life of St. Nino" written by her contemporaries was included in the book series the "Conversion of Kartli", compiled in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, and in the "Life of Kartli".

By the decision made at the Ecumenical Council in 451 in Chalcedon, five churches - Roman, Constantinopolitan, Antiochean, Alexandrian and Jerusalem remained autocephalous. The Church of Kartli constituted a part of the Antiochean patriarchate. Before that in 381, Pantophilus from Iberia (ibid. Kartli) attending the Ecumenical Council is mentioned as a representative of the Amasian diocese. Proceeding from that, it is believed that the Church of Kartli was subordinated to the Diocese of Pontus with the help of the Amasian Metropolitan by the end of the

4<sup>th</sup> century<sup>5</sup>.

In the second half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century the Church of Kartli rose and became stronger. This fact is connected with the name of the most powerful king, Vakhtang Gorgasali.

Since the majority of Kartli was under political control of Persia, “fire-worshiping was spread among common people”. King Vakhtang Gorgasali started his reign by carrying out reforms in church. He chose pro-western orientation and gained for the Church of Kartli the status of autocephaly.

There were two opposing strands in Christianity: Diophysitism (acknowledging dual nature of Christ - divine and human) and Monophysitism (acknowledging only divine nature of Christ). In 451, the Chalcedonian 4<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council accepted Diophysitical dogma and rejected Monophysitism.

After Mobidan who was secretly writing “wrong books”, Chalcedonite Michael sent from Byzantium was appointed the Archbishop of Kartli and he strived to eliminate the influence of Persian beliefs. Since King Vakhtang Gorgasali of Kartli visited Jerusalem together with his mother and sister, later on established the institution of Catholicos in Kartli, and decided to bring Peter as Catholicos and Samuel as Archbishop from Constantinople, the insulted and disobedient Michael was sent to Constantinople.

According to the “Life of Kartli”, King Vakhtang established many new bishoprics and assigned “one bishop in Klarjeti in the church of Akhizi, one in Artaani, in Erusheti, one in Javakheti, in Tsunda, one in Manglisi, one in Bolnisi, one in Rustavi, in Ninotsminda, Ujarmiskari, Cheremi - built by Gorgasali, one in Cheleti, one in Khornabuji, one in Agaraki (Khunani) and one in Nikozi, with an assigned bishop”<sup>6</sup>.

In the earlier half of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, after Saba was appointed as Catholicos in Kartli, the cathedral of Catholicos was always served by priests of the Georgian origin. According to the “Conversion of Kartli”, “after that, two families, natives from Mtskheta succeeded to the throne of Catholicos”. Georgian chronicler Juansher also testifies: “Since then they did not bring a Catholicos from Greece, but Georgian nobles were assigned to it”<sup>7</sup>.

Since the second decade of the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the Church of Kartli refuses to have any conciliatory position towards Monophysitism and steadily insists on having Diophysitism acknowledged. The latter occurred in the 591, after concluding a treaty between Byzantium and Iran. Under that treaty, the larger part of Kartli up to Tbilisi came under the control of Byzantium. Despite the fact that Persia and Byzantium formally divided Kartli into two parts, Stephanoz of Tbilisi being Guaram's son, considered they were entitled to ruling both parts of the country. Meanwhile, favorable conditions were created for the followers of Christianity. The Jvari (Cross) Monastery in Mtskheta built in the late 6<sup>th</sup> early 7<sup>th</sup> century furnishes a good example.

The 7<sup>th</sup> century started with a complete split of the Georgian and Armenian Churches. In the early 7<sup>th</sup> century, Abraham, the Catholicos of Armenia wrote to the Catholicos of Kartli “We hardly believe in devoted love to Byzantium from a slave of the king of kings as well as in his separating from Persia having the same faith”<sup>8</sup>.

Ecclesiastical policy in Georgia was part of the Near East policy. The main political sides of those days were Byzantium and Persia. In 614, the Persian King Chosroes II sacked Jerusalem, and in 616 convened an ecclesiastical meeting where he obliged the Christian residents of the Empire to “adopt Armenian Christianity”. The Catholicos of Kartli Kirion was compelled to leave Kartli.

Shortly after, international situation changed in favor of Byzantium. However, Emperor Heraclius seeking to spare his empire from dividing, tried to spread a new course of “Monothelitism” that recognized Christ's dual nature Divine and Human, but one will of God. That was a step towards a compromise between Monophysitism and Dyophysitism. In the third decade of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Heraclius joined western Kartli. In western Georgia, in the Greek Metropolis of Phasis and some other bishoprics subordinated to it, the Divine Service was conducted in the Greek language.

The new course appeared to be unacceptable for many people. Among the opposition there was Pope Martini and a monk from Byzantium, a well-known theologian Maxim the Confessor who, mute and crippled, was exiled together with his two disciples to western Georgia where he died. A letter, sent from western Georgia by his disciple, shows that Monotheitism was alien and unacceptable to the native people and they sympathized greatly with the persecuted. The Georgian Church was the only one among Eastern Christian Churches that did not share the iconoclasm waged during the reign of Leon III the Isaurian in Byzantium. It was rejected and condemned by the 7<sup>th</sup> and the last Ecumenical Council in Nicea. All this proves that by that time the Georgian society already had profound and unique religious traditions. As a prominent Georgian scholar George the Athonite living in the 11<sup>th</sup> century writes about the firm determination of the Georgian Church to stick to the initial orientation taken by the church: “since we once believed were deviated neither to the right, nor to the left”<sup>9</sup>.

In the mid -7<sup>th</sup> century Christianity faced a new threat. A new religion, Islam, was on the rise in the Arabian Peninsula. Since that period Kartli found itself under the political control of Arabs which grew more severe with time. One of such periods can be found in the seventh decade of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, when an Emir appeared in Tbilisi and the future of Georgia's rich and original national culture was put into question. A Georgian chronicler bewails with grief from remote centuries: “Many of those who betrayed Christ were tempted and misled from the Path of the Truth, some by force and lies, others by inexperience of adolescence and evil doing”. But culture, carried through centuries, turned out to be strong, endured hard trials and survived. The majority of Georgians “remain devoted to the only begotten Son of God with love and fear to Christ, responsibility to the motherland, with patience to grief and sorrows,” - declares Ioane Sabanisdze proudly<sup>10</sup>.

In the fourth decade of the 8<sup>th</sup> century the Church of Kartli sent representatives to Antioch. Their main aim was to settle the matter of autocephaly of the Church of Kartli. Antiochean patriarch Theopilakte once again canonized the Georgian Bishop's right to sanctify the Catholicos of Kartli. Until the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Eastern Churches as well as Kartli got the chrism from Jerusalem. In the

9<sup>th</sup> century the Church of Kartli, owing to the endeavors by an apprentice of Grigol Khandzteli, Bishop of Atskveri Ephrem, was given the right by the Patriarch of Jerusalem to prepare chrisim in Georgia. So, the Bishop of Kartli was equalized with the world's five Patriarchs those of Rome, Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch, and Constantinople. The deed of 1259 testified to that effect, and was signed as follows: "We, the 6<sup>th</sup> Patriarch of Svetitshkoveli and Catholicos of All Georgia by Christ Nicolos, affirm and sign"<sup>11</sup>. Until the 11<sup>th</sup> century the head of the Georgian Orthodox Church was called "Kartli Catholicos" ("Mtskheta Catholicos"). Since the 11<sup>th</sup> century its synonyms "Patriarch of All Georgia" or "Great Patron" have been used, or "Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia", the latter was first used to mention Melcisedek I (1010-1033).

By the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century Leon II, the ruler of Abkhazia detached from political control of Byzantium and received the title of the King of Abkhazia. After the unification of Western Georgia the Kingdom of Abkhazia covered the territory from Nikopsia to the Likhi (Surami) range. Kutaisi becomes the capital of the new state, and Georgian acquired the status of the state language. In the battles for the unification of Georgia Abkhazian kings tried to annex Inner Kartli, Kakheti and Hereti. Javakheti was part of the Kingdom as well.

In 978 Bagrat III, the heir of the title "King of Kartvels (Georgians)" from his paternal line and a descendant of Abkhazian kings from his maternal line, was enthroned in Kutaisi. The Georgian State, united during his reign, maintained the name of the "Kingdom of Abkhazia" for a long time. It was gradually replaced by the term "Sakartvelo" (Georgia). Following the unification of Georgia, the titles of kings were changed: "King of Abkhazians, Kartvels (Georgians), Rans and Kakhs". Tbilisi Emirate and Tashir-Dzorageti Georgian Kingdom with the Armenian dynasty were left beyond the country's borders.

Kings of Abkhazia united the Church of Western Georgia, the centers of which were the Metropolitan see of Nikopsia, Sebastopolis and Phasis, with the autocephalous Abkhazian Church and became independent of the Patriarch of Constantinople, but later on, it was subordinated to the Catholicos of Mtskheta. In the second decade of the 10<sup>th</sup> century George II spread the influence of the Georgian Church over the Northern Caucasus (Kingdom of Alans). During the reign of Bagrat III Bedia and Kutaisi Cathedrals were built. The latter is known today as the Bagrati Cathedral. The Metropolitan see of Phasis that was dependent on Constantinople and Episcopacy thrones of Rodopolis were abolished. The Western Georgian Church that according to hierarchy was subdued to the Catholicos of Georgia replaced the Greek language with Georgian in divine service. Since the Cathedral of the Abkhazian Catholicos was in Bichvinta, he was called "Catholicos of Bichvinta" as well. Until the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century the Abkhazian Catholicos was in fact the Bishop of Abkhazia. In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Giorgi Merchule once again confirms the rule adopted by the 4<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council, according to which ecclesiastical borders have to be the same as the state borders with only one difference: in this case the union of church preceded and speeded up the political unification of the country: "The very country in which liturgy (mass) and all prayers are delivered in Georgian is considered to be

Kartli”<sup>12</sup>.

Ecclesiastic tradition narrates about the divine origin of royal Bagrationi Dynasty, considering it to be the descendant of Prophet David. The related evidence is preserved in Byzantine chronicle by Constantine Porphyrogenetes, while Grigol Khandtsteli addresses Ashot the Curopalates with the following words: “Me Lord, the son of Prophet David sanctified by God”<sup>13</sup>.

The Georgians made their contribution to the world's cultural treasury. In the churches and monasteries founded by them, apart from religious services they performed national and cultural activities, created original works, translated theological literature written in different languages. Thanks to Georgian monks, many works in other languages whose originals have been lost are only known due to the Georgian translations. Georgian ecclesiastics loved the Holy lands, where they had closer relations with the world's church and ecclesiastical world. The first Georgian monasteries appeared in Egypt and Palestine in the 4<sup>th</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup> centuries. About 100 large and small Georgian monasteries are mentioned in historic sources in different periods both in Georgia and beyond.

The legend has it that the first Christian King Mirian chose the location of the Cross Monastery while being a pilgrim in Jerusalem. In the course of centuries St. Sava Monastery built near Jerusalem became famous for its literary and logical-philosophical traditions. In this very monastery the Georgian translation of biblical books, so called Sabatsminduri was made, and the ancient Georgian Typikon was created in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. Also some other monasteries made a name for themselves such as: Palavra, Jerusalem Cross Monastery and cloisters founded near Antioch or in Asia Minor. Among the Georgian religious centers of the West Athos (10<sup>th</sup> century) and Petritsoni (11<sup>th</sup> century) monasteries gained special fame. Georgian monasteries abroad were centers bringing together the Georgians living outside their homeland, and monks staying there were ambassadors of their country. Their main purpose was to serve the Georgian culture and the Georgian language. On the one hand, cloisters founded by them strongholds of Christianity were part of a larger world; on the other hand, they were indivisible from Georgia, a sort of smaller Georgia, that always had tight bonds with the motherland. Everyday prayers delivered by the monks in Palestine in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries clearly shows close links of the Georgian centers abroad to their motherland as well as their main destination: “Let's pray to God, for peace in Kartli, the keeping of borders, calming down the kings and rulers, repelling the enemies, releasing the captives, passing away of the plague, steadiness of Christianity... Oh, Christ, forgive all brothers, and all Christians, and most of all, the Georgians”<sup>14</sup>.

First monasteries in Georgia appeared during the reign of King Vakhtang Gorgasali. He ordered to build the monastery of Opiza near Artanuji. In mid 5<sup>th</sup> century Tana (or Ateni) Monastery already existed. In Georgia as well as in other places there existed friaries and nunneries.

Monastery building in Eastern Georgia began when Syrian Fathers came to the country. According to the literature, “Assyrian Fathers” were Georgians and spoke Georgian. They initiated building of Davidgareji, Dodorka, John the

Baptist, Zedazeni, Ulumba, Shiomghvime, Martkopi, Alaverdi, Stepantsminda, Breti, Khirsi, Samtavisi, Ikalto and other monasteries. In the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries monastery building and restoring took place in Klarjeti, Tao and Kartli. “Klarjeti Archimandrite”, where the first Archimandrite was Grigol Khandzteli, was also founded during that period; other famous centers and monasteries: Zarzma, Khandzta, Shatberdi, Nedzvi, Kviriketsminda, Tskarostavi, Breta, Meresi, Old Opiza, Midznadzori were founded as well. Monasteries were built also by the kings or they took them into their possession. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century Shiomghvime, Davidgareji monasteries were taken into the royal possession. Gelati Monastery was built in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, as “another Jerusalem of the whole East”, or “another Athens”. It sent to the world a new message of the empowered Georgia - to replace the weakening Byzantium.

There are also a number of cave monasteries, like Davidgareji, Vardzia, and Vahani in Georgia.

The beginnings of the written tradition in the Georgian language are connected with Christianity. The rich hagiographic literature in the Georgian language already existed in the 4<sup>th</sup> -5<sup>th</sup> centuries. Other genres of Christian writing developed as well: Homiletic, Hymnography. Collections, lectionaries, chant appeared. Ecclesiastical architecture with its own traditions emerged. Originally, basilica-type buildings and especially three-nave basilica were widespread, but later, the so-called cross-domed-type edifices, the finest examples of which are: the Cross (Jvari) cathedral (6<sup>th</sup> - 7<sup>th</sup> centuries); in the 7<sup>th</sup> -8<sup>th</sup> centuries similar cathedrals of Tsromi, Atenis Sioni, Old Shuamta in Kakheti, Chkondidi in Samegrelo and others emerge. Churches and monasteries were furnished with ornaments, frescos, wall painting. Ecclesiastic law developed, based on the “Short Version Nome canon” and “Great Nome canon”. The former was compiled by Ekvtime the Athonite. The latter was translated from Greek by Arsen of Ikalto in the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

Splitting up into Catholic and Orthodox churches was not immediately recognized by Georgians. About 1065, Giorgi Mtatsmindeli made the following comment concerning the ecclesiastic discord between Rome and Constantinople: “As heresy has occurred so many times among Greeks.... Holy councils among ecclesiastic leaders were summoned and this issue was thoroughly investigated...but Khroms (i.e. the western church), once they acknowledged God, they have never deviated from this faith and they have never practiced heresy...”<sup>16</sup> At that time, political and spiritual unification of the Caucasus was on the agenda in Georgia. In the 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> centuries, during the reign of Bagrat IV, David the Builder and Tamar, the church councils were convened with the purpose of unification of the Georgian and Armenian churches. Christianity still remained the axis which unified even politically antagonistic sides. Liparit Baghvashi, Bagrat IV's rival, rendered financial assistance to Giorgi Mtatsmindeli who was working on a new version of the Gospel's translation in the Georgian monastery on Athos, and later assisted in dissemination of this translation in Georgian monasteries.

David the Builder, the unifier of the country, started his activities with the

church reform. Ruisi-Urbnisi church council held under King David was an important step towards the country's centralization. The council purged the clerical hierarchy, expelled the “unworthy” holding high positions due to their noble origin. According to the Nome canon's principles, he cancelled titles and personal virtues came to the fore. Byzantine Queen Martha, David's aunt was present at the meeting and that stressed its international importance. Being faithful to traditions, Georgian kings took great care of Georgian churches and monasteries and “Prayers were ceaselessly delivered” in the Palace Church. In spite of obstacles and impediments, the Georgians not only retained their centers abroad, but they also enjoyed certain privileges. According to Jack de Vitry, Akra Latin Bishop (1216-1228), “the Georgians, visiting Sepulcher, enter the holy city with unfolded banners paying tribute to nobody”; in 1347 “the Georgians have the key to the Holy Sepulcher, and they won't let anybody have the smallest piece of the gravestone even for much money.” According to the information dated 1483, “Many Georgians live in Jerusalem and own plenty of holy sites...They set off to Jerusalem with unfolded banners and returned to Georgia without paying any tribute”<sup>17</sup>.

The Georgian Church survived 100-years domination of Mongols, devastating invasions of Timur-Lang, Kara-koyunlu and Ak-koyunlu. Each time of destroying was followed by building and restoration first of all of the churches and monasteries. The Georgians gave the King Alexandre reigned after Timur-Lang the name “the Great” for such activity.

In 1453, the fall of Constantinople and Byzantium, emergence of a neighboring Moslem Ottoman and later Safavid states and political disintegration of Georgia did great harm to the country's spiritual unity. Georgia became surrounded by the powerful Muslim countries. A new stage of struggle for the survival started. The Samtskhe leaders took steps to have the Meskheti church seceded from the mother church. The Antioch and Jerusalem patriarchs, on the other hand, tried to separate Western Georgian and Meskheti churches from the Georgian Church. Such an attempt failed. The Meskheti bishops were forced to take the oath: “Neither to let in the foreign ecclesiastic nor to read their books, nor to listen to their commandment, nor to believe in their faith. Our clergy and deacons must be ordained only in Mtskheta and we must obey your orders”<sup>18</sup>.

The 17<sup>th</sup> century was distinguished with the plentitude of Christian martyrs, only a few of whom were canonized: in 1616, 6000 martyrs were massacred in David Gareji desert, the Georgian King Luarsab II was executed in 1622, the Kakhetian Queen St. Ketevan was martyred 1624, the Kherkheulidze nine brothers together with their mother and sister and 9000 Georgians were killed on Marabda battlefield in 1625, St. Father Evdemoz the Patriarch, head of the Georgian Church, was martyred in 1624, Bidzina Cholokashvili, Elizbar and Shalva Ksani Eristavis (dukes) and many others were also martyred. Those martyrs personified the Georgian nation, exemplifying heroism and firmness. In those centuries as never before, fighting for being Christian meant fighting for being Georgian.

By the fourth decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there were only a few functioning

episcopates in Kartli-Kakheti, but none of them were in Meskheta. Starting from 1633 Iranian Shah's Viceroy-Muslim Vali ascended to the Georgian throne. However, according to the Georgian sources, he was called the King in an old manner. The fact of the assassination of King Giorgi XI by the Afghans, attests to the Georgians' loyalty towards Christian traditions. The Georgian King was wearing a cross on his chest. That very cross was sent to the Iranian Shah by the rebelled Afghan leader as accusatory evidence. Such a situation lasted until 1744, when Georgians regained the right to consecrate kings according to the Christian rule. During those hard times the Georgian Church continued to function and to unite the nation. Although in conditions of the country's decentralization, the united patriarchate disintegrated into two separate ones- Abkhazian and Kartlian, the perception of unity was not eradicated. In the fourth decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Vakhushki Bagrationi stresses: "If you ask any Georgian, that is Imeri, Meskhi and Her-Kakh, what their origin is, they will reply instantaneously: "Georgian"<sup>19</sup>. This is the period when faith determines ethnicity and the words "Georgian" and "Orthodox" become synonymous. The care for culture and education was continuous. The new cathedrals were built: Ananuri, the so-called Magalaant Towers (in Kavturi Valley), the Mchadijvari church (1668), the Anchiskhati bell-tower in Tbilisi (1675). In Georgia and beyond its borders printing-houses were set up, where Georgian books were published, hagiography revived and the cultural-educational activities of the churches and monasteries were revitalized. Affinity to one religion was a determining factor in search for allies. A vain quest for an ally in the West throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century by the orientation towards Orthodox Russia came to an end.

In 1783 the treaty of Georgievsk, signed between Russia and Georgia, actually laid the foundation for the abolition of the Georgian Church's independence, which can be inferred from the following statements of the document: "... After the unification with Russia and the Russians, our coreligionists, His Excellency wishes that the Catholicos, i.e. the Archbishop occupies the eighth place on the hierarchal scale of Russian bishops after Tobolsk"

<sup>20</sup>

In 1801, the Russian King annexed Georgia's centuries-old statehood on the basis of a manifesto. The Russian troops occupied the country. Conquest of Georgia by Russians started. In 1811, with the decision of the Emperor and Russia's Holy Synod the Georgian Apostolic Church's autocephaly was annulled. In 1814 this misfortune befell the Western Georgian Church. By that time out of thirteen eparchies functioning in Eastern Georgia, two were left, and in Western Georgia out of twelve eparchies three were left. Russia actively launched its Russification policy. In existing ecclesiastical schools the language of instruction was Russian. The authorities tried to use Orthodox Christianity as a means for assimilating the Georgians into the Russian nation.

The struggle for the restoration of the Georgian Church's autocephaly continued all through the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was crowned with success in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A Georgian noble's letter addressed to the Russian Emperor dated 11 October 1905, reads: "During the centuries the Georgians moaned under the

inexorable yoke of the rules of the Eastern countries. They endured cruelty. Nevertheless, the Iveri Church was invincible and viable, its spirit was powerful and its strength unconquerable ... Now the Georgian Orthodox Church should be given a free life and the legal authorities should take their positions again and the Catholicos elected by the people should be restored in his rights and responsibilities ...”<sup>21</sup>

In spite of the obstacles, after the Russian Revolution in February 1917, the Georgian clergy managed to restore the Georgian Church's autocephaly on 12 March. Georgian was adopted as the language of the divine service. However, with the intervention of the Russian Provisional Government, it was settled to lend autocephaly to the Georgian Church according to the ethnicity, not territory. Non-Georgian churches remained under the Russian rule. And still it was a victory. Georgian Catholicos-Patriarch Kirion Sadzaglishvili, addressed the Georgian nation with the following words: “It is our church's duty to remind humanity of the name of the Georgian nation. It should contribute to our consolidation and unification”<sup>22</sup>.

During the years of the Democratic Republic (1918-21) the Georgian Social-Democratic government came to recognize the call of the time that implied the speeding up of the secularization. On 17 July, 1920 the ecclesiastical council considered the issues of the secession of the church from the state, the transference of the ecclesiastical schools to the ministry, the church budget, the conditions of life of the clergy and the unification of Mtsketa and Tbilisi Eparchies.

On 25 February 1921 the Bolshevik Red Army annexed Georgia. As a response, Ambrosi Khelaia, the Georgian Patriarch, sent a memorandum to the “Genoese Conference”. The leader of the Georgian Church brought to the world's attention that “the Georgian nation was deprived of the mother tongue and its ancestral national culture and religious belief were profaned” and demanded that “the Russian military occupation be withdrawn from Georgia immediately”<sup>23</sup>. But his voice as well as numerous pleas addressed to the authorities went unheard and remained unanswered. The Orthodox Patriarchates did not recognize the Georgian Church's autocephaly and it was considered as an integral part of the Russian Church. This situation continued until 1943. By that time the number of the functioning churches was reduced to 15. In World War II, activities undertaken by the Georgian Church in support of the fighting nation had its effect. Those efforts were not left unnoticed and owing to the diplomatic talent and relentless work of the Georgian Catholicos-Patriarch Kalistrate Tsintsadze, in 1943 the Russian Church officially recognized the territorial autocephaly announced by the Georgian Orthodox Church on 12 March, 1917<sup>24</sup>. The struggle started for the restoration of the cancelled churches and monasteries and for recovering holy relics. But the persecution of the Georgian churches was not over and it continued after Stalin's death. Despite repressions, in 1917-78 the Georgian clergy held 12 ecclesiastical councils.

On 23 December, 1977, Ilia II (Shiolashvili-Ghudushauri), the Metropolitan of Tskum-Abkhazeti was elected as Catholicos-Patriarch in Tbilisi. Owing to his endeavors the Georgian Church's long autocephalous movement

crowned with success. On 25 January, 1990, The World Patriarch in Constantinople issued the deed of the Georgian Church's autocephaly, and on 3 March published the document recognizing the title of the Georgian Church's Catholicos-Patriarch..

Today, there are 35 eparchies and about 700 active churches and monasteries in Georgia. The Georgian polyphonic chanting is restored in the Georgian Church. The Concordat between the state and the church is achieved.

On 9 April, 1991, Georgia regained political independence. The independent Georgian state started working towards establishing a respectable place in the world community. We have a long way to go. We hope that the obstacles along the way of developing our state will be overcome, in the first place, due to the Georgian Autocephalous Church. This is the very church that helped the Georgians to retain their national integrity. Even in times of hardship and misfortune the reputation of the nation was impeccable. "Clergy supported faith by motherland and nationality, motherland and nationality by faith, and thus empowered the nation led by the Holy Trinity,... saving the house and Georgian self-consciousness to Georgia" (Ilia Chavchavadze).

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