

Jvari Monastery,
Mtskheta, Georgia,
c. 600. Photo: Daisy
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ANNALS OF HISTORY

Orthodoxy and Nationalism in Georgia

Guram Lursmanashvili

Although the Orthodox churches have explicitly condemned ecclesiastical racism, or ethnophyletism, they have never forbidden Orthodox Christians of shared language, ethnicity, or geography from using religion as a criterion for who is “us” and who is “not us.” This kind of nationalism—that is, the process by which a group of people becomes recognizable to itself and to others as a nation—is not contrary to Orthodoxy. Furthermore, interactions between Orthodoxy and nationalism are not new. Rather, for two millennia, nationalism in this narrow sense of the word has interacted with Orthodoxy in various forms, although it is admittedly difficult to decide if this interaction has been, on balance, good or bad for the faith.

The relationship between nations and (Orthodox) Christianity dates back at least to the time of the Apostle Paul, when Jewish and Gentile followers of Christ first commingled in communities that would come to be called Christian. In those communities, under the guidance of Saint Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, salvation evolved from a process characterized by particularism to one characterized by universalism. As Paul proclaimed: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:27–8). Paul’s proclamation, however, should not be understood as a polemic against “nations” themselves—not as

that concept was understood at that time and for the next few centuries. Otherwise we would not have such early examples of “Christian nations” as the ancient nation of Georgia.

In the fourth century, King Mirian of Kartli (a region in the Caucasus that would come to be part of the Georgian lands) converted to Christianity after encountering Saint Nino, the baptizer of Georgia. He then proclaimed Christianity the official religion of his kingdom. The Orthodox Christian faith became one of the main factors in the formation of the Georgian nation after this event, and remains a signifier of Georgian ethnic identity. But as Teimuraz Buadze notes, Georgian as a *religious* identity preceded Georgian as an *ethnic* identity.¹ To what extent this relationship between Georgian nationality and Orthodox Christianity has been a net positive or net negative for the people of that country is up for debate.

Evidence for both positions can certainly be found in the annals of the country’s history, but in my view, the positive results of the interaction of Orthodoxy and nationalism in Georgia outweigh the negative ones in both significance and quantity. In large part, this is a product of Georgia’s relatively small sphere of influence. Even during its golden age, Georgia was never an empire like Byzantium or Russia. Unlike them, Georgia never tried to use Orthodoxy as a tool to secure its political interests at the expense of other peoples, preferring to direct that influence inward to contain and consolidate its own polity. Perhaps for this reason, nationalism and Orthodoxy interact quite differently in contemporary Georgia than in the successor states of the Byzantine and Russian empires in Europe and Asia. In Georgia, we find a distinct model for how these increasingly antagonis-

tic forces—nationalism and Orthodoxy—can cooperate.

Nationalism and Orthodoxy in Georgia: Beginnings

The *Georgian Chronicles*, a compendium of texts dating from the ninth through the fourteenth centuries, provide important information about how Georgians have historically understood the relationship between their national and religious identities. The Orthodox Church of Georgia can be traced back to the Christianization of Iberia and Colchis by the Apostle Andrew in the first century, and by Saint Nino in the fourth century, respectively. The *vita* of prominent Georgian churchman Saint Gregory of Khandzta (759–861), written in the tenth century, describes Georgia as “those spacious lands in which church services are celebrated and all prayers said in the Georgian tongue.”² From the fourth through the ninth centuries, this relatively simple criterion encountered several challenges.

The Georgian Orthodox Church and the Georgian state faced three common issues that affected their relationship with one another. The first was that, after the Council of Chalcedon (451), Georgia’s southern neighbor, Armenia, separated from the unified church. From that time until the present day, “Georgian” distinguished those who accepted the proclamations of the Council from those who did not. In several cases, the *Georgian Chronicles* identify individuals as “Armenian by faith” despite being, for all intents and purposes, legal citizens of Georgia.³

The second issue was that Georgia’s common faith with the Byzantine Empire threatened the country’s independence from Constantinople. The third was the efforts of the Muslim Arabs

¹ Teimuraz Buadze, “Georgian Nation and Christianity,” August 9, 2012, <http://www.orthodoxtheology.ge/ქართველი-ერო-და-ქრისტიან/>.

² David Marshall Lang, “Gregory of Khandzta and the Georgian National Revival,” 1999, <http://www.angelfire.com/ga/georgian/gregory.html>.

³ *Kartlis Tskhovreba: A History Of Georgia*, trans. Stephen Jones et al. (Tbilisi: Artanuji Publishing, 2014), 307.

King David IV of Georgia. Fresco at Gelati Monastery, Kutaisi, Georgia.

and Seljuks to conquer Georgian territory and to convert Georgians to Islam. From my perspective, the Georgian state and the Georgian Church successfully met all three challenges, accounting for the unique relationship between Orthodoxy and nationalism in the country today.

From David IV to Tamar

In 1089, King George II was confronted by a major threat to the kingdom of Georgia when the Seljuk Turks invaded Georgian lands. Tbilisi had already been in the hands of Muslim rulers since the eighth century. Seeing his kingdom slip into chaos, George II ceded the crown to his 16-year-old son David, who inherited a dysfunctional state, a ravaged countryside, and the enormous responsibility of the church's welfare.

King David IV acknowledged that without a strong church, it would be impossible to reconstruct Georgia. During this period, the church hierarchy was chosen through nepotism and simony, rather than on the basis of personal dignity, education, or piety. The result was a seriously damaged Georgian Orthodox Church that had lost the trust of the Georgian people and was effectively functioning as a state within a state, clashing with the authority of a monarch. To find a solution, the king convened and supported the efforts of the Council of Ruis-Urbnisi in 1103 to restore and to reinforce the authority of the Georgian church and to suppress unworthy clergymen and clerical hierarchs who had received their ranks through intrigue, who lived in ways unbecoming of clergymen, and who displayed little or no loyalty to king and country.

After this council, the king gave enormous power to his friend and advis-



er George of Chkondidi. King David combined two offices—those of court chancellor and of clergyman—into a single one, *Chkondidi-mtsignobartukhutsesi*. Henceforth, The Archbishop of Chkondidi (a diocese located in western Georgia) would be the king's chief adviser and would wield broad powers over the state's domestic and foreign policy. Generally speaking, King David's strategy was successful: by consolidating political control over the church, David restored his people's trust in the Georgian Orthodox Church, achieving what his father could not. But he did not rest on this success.

David recognized that without an educated class that could develop science, technology, and culture in Georgia—and, more importantly, could maintain the careful balance of church-state relations—his achievements would diminish over time. Hence, from 1106

to 1110, the king established an academy near Kutaisi at Gelati Monastery, whose influence would permeate the country and would shape the scientific innovations, social mores, and cultural achievements of Georgia's golden age. At Gelati, the most celebrated Georgian scientists, theologians and philosophers, such as Ioane Petritsi and Arsen Iqaltoeli, taught the classical *trivium* and *quadrivium* to generations of students until the sixteenth century, when the monastery became defunct. Another monastery David established at Iqalto, in eastern Georgia, also flourished. Keenly aware that a rival to Gelati would stimulate a fruitful intellectual climate, David installed philosopher Arsen Iqaltoeli as the first rector of the academy there.

According to David's plan, the monasteries prepared educated people to fill the state bureaucracy as well as the ranks of the Georgian Orthodox Church, which remained one of the most important organs of the state apparatus and inspired unity among the populace. David's successors, Demetrios I and George III, in many cases tried to continue his strategy of closely connecting Orthodoxy and national identity, in order to control the state efficiently. While the reigns of both kings illustrate the continuing intertwining of Orthodox Christian and Georgian identity, it was during the reign George III's daughter Tamar that the relationship between nationality and Orthodox faith took on a distinct form in Georgia.

In 1178, King George III appointed the 18-year-old Tamar (c. 1160–1213) as his heir apparent and co-ruler, in order to forestall any dispute after his death. During her reign, the Kingdom of Georgia reached the peak of its power and development. In addition to military expansion, this period saw

a flourishing of Georgian architecture, painting, and poetry, expressed in the development of ecclesiastical art as well as the creation of the first major works of Georgian secular literature. Harmony reigned between Georgia's Orthodox peoples and those of other religions, setting a standard for tolerance in multiethnic kingdoms. The slaughter of pigs was forbidden in areas settled by Muslims, who, along with the Jews, also enjoyed a lower tax burden than Orthodox Georgians.

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Queen Tamar of
Georgia. Icon at the
Metekhi Church
of the Dormition,
Tbilisi, Georgia.



Queen Tamar's reign may present the best example of the important role the Orthodox Church of Georgia played in developing the Georgian nation, made all the more clear in contrast with the somewhat sad story of the Mkhargrdzeli brothers. These brothers were Tamar's star military generals. They conquered parts of present-day Armenia and eastern Anatolia for her, and she honored them by appointing them to the highest levels of nobility. But for all that Ivane Mkhargrdzeli and his brother Zakaria shared with regard to their military prowess and their upward trajectory in Tamar's court, the two were divided by religion.

Ivane, a high-ranking vizier in Tamar's government whom she honored with the privilege of fostering her heir and son, abided in the self-professed superiority of his "Georgian faith" and appealed to Zakaria to join him as a member of the Georgian Orthodox Church. Zakaria, whose recently conquered lands in the southern part of Georgia were populated by peoples of Armenian origin, refused. He replied to his brother, "I will not be united with Georgians," and continued to profess the non-Chalcedonian Armenian Apostolic faith.⁴ That the break between these brothers was one of both religion and nationality simultaneously shows the extent to which *Georgian* had become, by the reign of Tamar, a distinct identity in which faith and fatherland were inextricably linked.

That link did not break, but it did transform in the following centuries, as the fortunes of the Georgian people declined significantly from their apogee under Queen Tamar. After her death in 1213, the legacy of her ancestor David—the unification of church and state and the flourishing of civil society—began to unravel, and Geor-

gia entered into decline. Unable to withstand the Mongol invasion, Tbilisi fell in 1226, and much of the former strength and prosperity of the Kingdom of Georgia was destroyed, leaving the country under Mongol dominance until the fourteenth century. By that time, church and state were too thoroughly damaged for another renaissance, but they still persisted, even as the Turks conquered Constantinople, and tiny Georgia was gradually enclosed by non-Orthodox nations.

Misguided Alliances

By the late eighteenth century, eastern Georgia was in danger from Persia, western Georgia from the Ottomans, and northern Georgia from various Caucasian tribes. With his kingdom surrounded, King Erekle II of the east Georgian kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti looked north. "Orthodox Russia" would be Georgia's best defense against Muslim enemies, reasoned Erekle, who thus cultivated a close connection with the tsar. The resulting treaty with Russia, signed at Georgievsk on July 24, 1783, guaranteed Russian protection for Georgia, much to the displeasure of Persia. In fact, the signing of the treaty provoked the very hostilities it was designed to prevent: in 1795, Persia attacked Georgia in what came to be called the Battle of Krtsanisi, a direct response to King Erekle's alliance with the Russian Empire. Russia reneged on its commitments, however, and declined to help Georgia, which fell to Persia and lost its independence. In the years that followed, Persia and Russia jockeyed for control of Georgia. By the nineteenth century, what had begun as an alliance between Georgia and the Russian Empire had evolved into outright Russian occupation of both the Georgian state and the Georgian Orthodox Church. For example, in 1811, Tsar Alexander I eliminated

⁴ *Kartlis Tskhovreba*, 263.

the independence of the Georgian church and in place of the Catholicos—the ancient title of the Georgian primate—established a “Synodal Exarch over Georgia.” This period was very difficult for Georgia because, as Paul Werth writes:

All Exarchs after the first (Varlaam Eristavi) were Russians unfamiliar with local languages. Georgian was increasingly excluded from church administration, ecclesiastical education, and liturgy, while knowledge of Russian became a prerequisite for candidacy to the priesthood. An aggressive campaign of “denationalization” seems to have been initiated already under Varlaam’s successor, while more heavy handed Russification appeared in the 1880s. In the Tbilisi seminary, for example, “a harsh Russianizing regime was installed,” as Russian replaced Georgian as the language of instruction. Russian hierarchs seem to have regarded the Caucasus as a “wild” region and were generally eager to leave for service in the Russian interior as soon as possible.⁵

To Georgians, the result was a curious sense of loss, as it became apparent for the first time that being Georgian was not simply the same as being Orthodox. For although the Russian occupation meant that Georgia’s Orthodox Christian identity was not in jeopardy (how could it be when the occupier was Orthodox?), a new sense of national identity—one related to but not determined by Orthodoxy—started to emerge among the Georgian people, and soon sparked protests for self-determination.

The results were gruesome. During various insurrections in 1820 alone, around two thousand Georgians died. In the ensuing decades, the Georgian

people’s resentment intermittently erupted in local unrest.⁶ At the Tbilisi seminary in 1886, for example, a student, Joseph Lagiashvili, assassinated the Russian rector Paul Chudetsky, who had attempted to replace everything Georgian in the seminary—language, history, rules—with Russian equivalents. Notably, the students perceived these actions as hostile attacks against the national interests of Georgia, not necessarily against her spiritual interests.

A New Chapter in the Relation of Orthodoxy and Nationalism

For political scientists, historians, psychologists, and sociologists, “nationalism” has different and sometimes conflicting definitions, but often they at least agree about the historical era in which it emerged.⁷ Usually, this era is said to begin with the French Revolution of 1789, which inspired peoples all over Europe to fight for the right to self-determination throughout the nineteenth century. Often, a people coalesced around a single personality, who in subsequent generations acquired almost mythical stature. For Georgians, that person was (and is) Ilia Chavchavadze. A political figure, poet, and publisher who led the Georgian nationalist movement against Russian rule, Chavchavadze is often seen as Georgia’s “most universally revered hero.”⁸

In 1860, one of his articles declared that Georgians had inherited three divine treasures: homeland, language, and faith. He not only enjoined Georgians to preserve these treasures for future generations, but also powerfully connected their revolutionary present to their past through the medium of the Georgian Orthodox faith. It appears that in this statement Chavchavadze was citing Vakhusti Batonishvili, the

⁵ Paul Werth, “Georgian Autocephaly and the Ethnic Fragmentation of Orthodoxy,” *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 23 (2006): 84. regions in the Caucasus area of Eurasia from the Bronze Age of the 15th century BCE.

⁶ Metropolitan Anania Japaridze, *A Short History of the Georgian Church*, ed. Mamuka Matsaberidze (Hauppauge, New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2014).

⁷ See Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983); Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2001); Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁸ Stephen Kinzer, “On the Tallest Pedestal, a Man for All Georgians,” *New York Times*, May 7, 1998: 4.

⁹ Ilia Chavchavadze quoted in Tatia Kekelia, "Building Georgian National Identity: A Comparison of Two Turning Points in History," in *Religion, Nation and Democracy in the South Caucasus*, ed. Alexander Agadjanian, Ansgar Jödicke, and Evert van der Zweerde (New York: Routledge, 2015), 123.

eighteenth-century Georgian prince, royal geographer, historian, and cartographer who considered that three divine treasures of the Georgian people were "faith, language, king."

Admittedly, Chavchavadze almost completely inverted Batonishvili's statement, demoting "faith" from first to third place. This inversion is how Chavchavadze helped avoid a violent rupture along religious fault lines of the kind that, in the next century, would separate India from Pakistan and

Bangladesh, Turkey from Greece, and Serbia from the rest of the former Yugoslavia. To avoid such a fate, rather than envision Orthodox Christianity as essential to Georgian national identity, Chavchavadze positioned Orthodoxy in the Georgian national structure so that religious differences would not undercut the unity of the Georgian state or subject it to the agendas of aggressive foreign powers. He remembered the price Georgia had paid for putting Orthodoxy above all other elements of its national identity when it signed the treaty of Georgievsk with Russia, leading to a century of subordination. A true visionary, Chavchavadze helped Georgia avoid making the same mistake again.

In a 1877 sociopolitical article entitled "Ottoman Georgia," Chavchavadze envisioned a Georgian state in which believers of various religions could coexist and could equally identify as Georgians. The Georgian Christian who has been persecuted for his faith understands the importance of not persecuting those who believe differently from himself, Chavchavadze wrote, continuing: "We are not afraid of the presence of different religions in the country. Georgians who were crucified for their religion do know the value of other religions. . . . We are not afraid of the fact that our brothers who live in Ottoman Georgia believe in Mohammed."⁹

Throughout history, some parts of Georgia had been occupied by the Ottoman Empire, and in those areas, many Georgians converted from Orthodoxy to Islam. Although they were still Georgians in spirit, their new religious identity would encumber their integration into a free Georgia. Chavchavadze tried to solve this problem by explaining to his readers that national identity did not demand that one be Orthodox;



Muslims, too, could be Georgians. This compromise reflected a widely shared hope that those in the Georgian territories that had been incorporated into the Ottoman Empire would be able to return to the Georgian state without introducing any conflicts between Christians and Muslims.

To understand Chavchavadze's attitude toward Orthodoxy and nationalism, it is essential to consider his letter to the rector of Tbilisi seminary, Bishop Seraphim, in 1898. During this period, the Divine Liturgy was celebrated throughout Georgia in Slavonic. Bishop Seraphim tried to justify this cultural imperialism by arguing that, for the Orthodox, the most important thing during the Liturgy was expressing one's love for Christ. If one truly loved Christ, why should it be a problem for Georgians to participate in a Divine Liturgy conducted in Slavonic? In his letter, Chavchavadze argued that in Georgia, the Liturgy must be celebrated in Georgian and not Slavonic: to restrict national forms of expression, such as the language of the Liturgy, would be an affront to God, who created multiple countries and nations.¹⁰

Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries

The movement toward an autocephalous Georgian Orthodox Church and an independent Georgian state was a unified effort, one that Georgian clergy and laypeople undertook hand in hand, even if these two goals were not achieved at the same time. The first victory came in 1917, when the Bolshevik Revolution dismantled the Tsarist autocracy in Russia. On March 12, Georgian clergy and laypeople in Mtskheta declared their church autocephalous, and in September, the church council of Georgia elected Bishop Kirion (Sadzaglishvili) to the rank of Catholicos. The declaration di-

vided Georgia into 13 dioceses, to be governed by a synod chaired by the Catholicos.

A formal declaration of political independence by the National Council of Georgia followed less than one year later, on May 26, 1918. Freedom, however, would be brief. After the Red Army invaded Georgia in 1921, both the Georgian state and the Georgian Orthodox Church lost their independence. The church was subjected to intense harassment. The atheist Soviet government closed hundreds of churches. Hundreds of monks were killed. The Soviet Union's anti-religious policy left no space for the symbiosis of Orthodoxy and nationalism that had formerly flourished in Georgia.

During World War II, some of the former cooperation between the two began to reemerge. In 1943, the Georgian Church was finally recognized as independent from the Moscow Patriarchate, on orders signed by Joseph Stalin, not out of good will but for wartime political purposes. Stalin himself was of Georgian background and had studied at the Tbilisi Orthodox seminary. He was well aware of the significance Orthodoxy held in the Georgian mind, and of the power of the Georgian Orthodox Church to arouse people politically. By authorizing the church's independence, Stalin effectively weaponized religious piety to drive Georgian support for the war effort. The Orthodox Church of Georgia accordingly took part in the USSR's propaganda campaign and enjoined Georgians to fight, explaining the war as a nationalistic struggle.¹¹

This close relationship yielded negative consequences for the church as well as the state. More than half a million Georgians fought in World War II.

(Saint) Ilia Chavchavadze.

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¹⁰ Vazha Kiknadze, "ილია ჭავჭავაძე და მე-19 საუკუნის სამღვდელოება," *Iberiana—იბერიის ვუმინ, დღეს, ხვალი*, 2007, <https://iberiana.wordpress.com/about/kiknadze-ilia/>.

¹¹ Gulzhaukhar Kokebayeva, Yerke Kartabayeva, and Aigul Sadykova, "The Evolution of Soviet Power's Religious Policy during the Great Patriotic War," *Asian Social Science* 11.3 (2015): 237.

Patriarch Ilia of Georgia conducting a mass baptism as part of his pledge to increase the birth rate in Georgia, 2019.



Out of a population of around 4 million, 300,000 died or disappeared. And yet this price was not high enough for the Soviet Union to let Georgians restore the independence of either state or church. The Georgian state was controlled by the Soviets. It could not participate in international activities without permission of Moscow and it was not able to manage its other activities freely. The Georgian Orthodox Church could not preach to its parishioners that they were Georgians rather than Soviets.

Such was the condition of many non-Russian Orthodox churches under Soviet hegemony. But unlike its Ukrainian or Belorussian counterparts, the Church of Georgia *had* experienced independence, albeit briefly, and it reclaimed this independence upon the

collapse of Soviet Union. On March 3, 1990, Patriarch of Constantinople recognized the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Georgia. Political independence followed on April 9, 1991, when the Supreme Council of Georgia declared national independence after a referendum days earlier.

It would be wrong to conclude from this history that the close relationship between an autocephalous Orthodox church and national identity is either positive or negative in absolute terms. Rather, the case of Georgia shows that it is necessary for Orthodox churches to distinguish between national values and ethnophyletist aspirations. The wealth of our Christian heritage in nations throughout the world is not a tool for political gamesmanship. ✱



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