

Experience of the Christian Church in Georgia (I-XXI Centuries)

The Georgian Orthodox Church is one of the oldest churches in the world. Its official name is "Georgian Apostolic Autocephalous Orthodox Church". It is often called "Georgian Church" though it is a territorial concept, not a national one.

The canonical field of the The Georgian Orthodox Church includes Georgia; it has its eparchies in historical Georgian provinces in Turkey, also on the territories of Armenia, Azerbaijan (Saingilo), as well as on territories of the Western Europe and USA. Nowadays, its Jurisdiction due to the political circumstances cannot be forced in the occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Osetia.

Georgian constitution recognizes a historic role of the Georgian Orthodox Church; the state of Georgia has initiated an agreement with the The Georgian Church exclusively which is recognized as a legislative document equivalent to the constitution.

According to the data The Georgian Orthodox Church has approximately 4 million members.

According to the ancient Georgian sources Christianity in Georgia is connected with the Church. Georgian Jews brought to Georgia one of the main Christian relics – the chiton of Christ which is buried in Mtskheta. On the burial place Svetitskhoveli Cathedral was built.

Andrew the Apostle and Simon the Zealot preached in Georgia. This fact is witnessed in ancient Georgian sourced. According to the sources Simon the Zealot died here in Georgia and was buried in Abkhazia, New Athos. Ancient Georgian sources tell us about Bartholomew the Apostle and Matthias the Apostle who also preached in Georgia. According to the tradition Matthias the Apostles' grave is on Apsaros (Gonio).

A premise for Georgians to get acquainted with the Christ's Law was the existence of the Jewish community in Georgian, since VII century BC. Georgian Jews never lost their connection with their historic homeland. Christianity reached the king's court, too. The 19th king of Georgia Rev (III century AD) heard about Christ and though he remained pagan he amended the laws according to Christian principles. So, Georgians called him Rev the Righteous.

Christian church existed in Georgia before Christianity was established as a state religion in 326 (when st. Nino preached in Georgia). This fact is confirmed by Georgian and foreign sources. According to many archaeological artifacts Christian communities existed in Georgia in II-III centuries. Early Christian symbols, graves, private houses where Christians gathered for the communion are identical to organization of Christians in the Roman Empire. We can conclude that if there were Christians in Georgia in I-III centuries then there should have been clergy, too.

Georgian royal house (Kartli kingdom or Iberia kingdom according to the foreign sources) was baptized in 326 after st. Nino preached to them. A religious identity of the first Christian king Mirian was determined by st. Nino's missionary work as well as by the king's political course (though the latter would be of no importance without a religious inspiration). Before Constantine became an individual ruler of the empire the eastern part of it was ruled by Licinius whose political and military ally was Iberian king Mirian. After Constantine's victory Georgia (Kartli aka Iberia) turned out to be face to face with the hostile Roman Empire. St. Nino not only preached Christianity in Georgia but also saved it from the political threat. King Mirian followed st. Nino's advice and sent to Constantine ambassadors.

The message of the diplomatic mission was this: Mirian became a Christian so he is not an Licinius' (who persecuted Christians) ally any more. Now he is looking forward to become an Constantine's ally who is a Christians' friend. Ambassadors ask the emperor to appoint clergy for Georgia. Constantine consented and sent priests and bishop to Georgia with Christian relics . Though there had been clergy in Georgia by that time bishop John who was sent by the emperor would play a role of a political guarantor. King Mirian subordinated Georgian bishop to John, so soon in Georgian sources he was referred to as an archbishop. For the first time in Georgian history Church borders coincided with those of the state. Scholars argue about legislative condition of the church organized by Mirian. According to the ancient Georgian sources the supreme priest was chosen and appointed exclusively in Georgia by the royal family, though a candidate may have been invited from the Roman Empire or from Armenia.

King Vakhtang Gorgasali made changes in the church in V century. The head of the The Georgian Church was first called "catholicos". Most of the scholars agree that the king obtained independence from Antioch church. Though, the issue is still a matter of question. Vakhtang Gorgasali was in conflict with Archbishop Michael (the cause of the conflict is not known exactly) who anathemized the king and his army. So, Georgian king was expelled from the church. But Vakhtang made some wise steps. He gathered 13 loyal priests and tried to ordain an archbishop for Georgia in neighboring churches. Antioch church ordained for him 13 bishops. One of them, named Peter, was appointed as a Catholicos which means he became a head of the rest of the bishops. Vakhtang brought to Georgia 13 ordained bishops and establishes new eparchies for them to rule. He established "his own" alternative church and confronted it to the already existed one that was ruled by an Archbishop Michael. In the course of the time the "new" church assimilated the "old" one. As a result, Archbishop Michael was left alone and he was expelled to one of the Constantinople's monasteries.

It is still unclear how could Vakhtang obtain church independence from Antioch church. Though the king was a high class political player he almost lost church autocephaly but he had no other way. Since then Antioch church had its claims to Georgian church. The claims became stronger in VIII century when the united Iberian kingdom collapsed. The claims were documented in Antioch chronograph of XI century. But before Vakhtang Gorgasali, in his times and after him The Georgian Church was always independent as it was established by the apostles.

In that period Georgian pilgrimage to the Holy Land grew stronger. We have VI-VII centuries documents of correspondence on religious issues between hierarchs of The Georgian Church with Pope of Rome and Patriarch of Jerusalem. Catholicos of The Georgian Church visited the Holy Land and wanted to meet Patriarch of Jerusalem. Procopius of Caesarea writes that Justin the Caesar (525-565) renewed Iberian monastery in Jerusalem.

In the first part of VI century there were already Biblical and liturgical books in Georgian language. Saba Gantsmendili allowed in his will (532) to serve a liturgy in Georgian language and read the New Testament in Georgian language.

In VI century 13 Assirian fathers came to Georgia led by John of Zedazeni. They established monastic life here. After the fathers' arrival Diophysitism grew stronger and Kartli (by the leadership of Kirion the Catholicos of Kartli) chose Orthodoxy in the beginning of VII century. This choice caused a great religious split in Caucasus (604-609).

As a result of Arab invasion in VIII-X centuries the country was split into several church units though Georgians always remembered their political and religious unity. A Higher and Lower Iberian churches were formed at that time – Mtskheta See (Catholicosate) and Abkhazian See (Catholicosate).

Then iconoclasm spread into Eastern Christian world but Georgia resisted it, so there was no iconoclasm here. According to the sources Guth Orthodox Bishop John came to Georgia to be ordained as a Bishop because the nearest church to Constantinople that could lawfully ordain clergy was Mtskheta church in Eastern Georgia (VIII c.) (Constantinople church had been taken over by iconoclasts by that time). In the paper that documents the ordination of John the Guth the head of the Mtskheta church is referred to as a Patriarch. Scholars think that the view according to which the head of The Georgian Church was given a title of a Patriarch in XI century and that Melchisedec I was the first Patriarch should be revised. Their view on the revision is based on the fact that the neighboring churches of Georgia (Armenian and Albanian) have referred their heads as Patriarchs since VIII century.

X century was marked by the fight for the counties' unity. A formula created in the church: Georgia is there where a liturgy is served on Georgian language. The concepts of a Georgian and an Orthodox Christian have been the same since then in people's minds.

Georgian liturgy was based on Jerusalem traditions at that time. Archaic traditions of Jacob's liturgy were spread in Georgia and in Georgian monasteries abroad, so called "Khanmeti Lectionary". It is the oldest lectionary that we have today (first part of the V c.);

After the great church schism in Caucasia dogmatic and polemical books were written. In these books The Georgian Church argued and claimed its Orthodox orientation. Polemic books against the heresies of that time (Arianism, Nestorianism, Monothelitism etc.) were translated but the most important was the polemic with Monophysitist churches (mainly, with Armenian).

Together with the tractates translated from Greek language original books were also written. We should note Arsen Sapharyte's historical and polemical tractate "On the Division of Kartli and Armenia" (XI). The processes previous the schism and its results are analysed in the book; historic basis and objective laws of the schism are defined.

By the end of the XI century countries of the South Caucasus were threatened by Turk and Seljuk invasions. Georgia led Caucasus to unity and political and social development. The king of Georgia at that time was David Aghmashenebeli (the Builder) (1089-1125). Political wisdom and religious tolerance was needed to keep multiethnic and multi-religious Caucasus unite. Monophysits and Muslim traders, scholars and poets felt at home in Georgia. David Aghmashenebeli payed a great attention to Georgian monasteries abroad, helped them materially and built churches. The king had immediate contact with Crusaders and his army fought side by side with them in battles for Lord's Grave.

Georgian government and church sent Georgian youth to Byzantium for education. John Petritsi and Arsen Ikaltoeli were educated in Mangan Academy. This was the ground for establishing Gelati (1106-1110) and Ikalto academies in Georgia.

Unfortunately, Georgia could not realize all its natural, political, cultural, economic and spiritual potential. Mongols invaded the land and last for hundred years; after them Iranians and Turks and Ottomans invaded the country

. In the second half of XV century several Georgia was divided into several counties due to invasions. As a result, Georgia lost its ecclesiastic unity.

Abkhazian Catholicosate (Western Georgia) separated from the church. Arch-priest of Abkhazian See was called Catholicos-Patriarch of Abkhazia. He subordinated Georgian Patriarch only in honor and maintained national and cultural unity with Georgia. In XVI century the residence of Catholicos-Patriarch of Abkhazia was moved to Gelati. Soon Georgian Patriarchate lost its See in Samtskhe-Saatabago which was then under Turkish ruling. Positions of The Georgian Church were weakened in Jerusalem, Athos and Sinai.

The most challenging for Georgia was the fact that political map of Middle East was changed. Constantinople fell in 1453. Trade roads from Europe to Asia moved to the North. Now Georgia was isolated from all civilized Christian world and was left alone among Muslims. Georgia tried to establish diplomatic contacts with European countries but it failed. The joint plan of Pope of Rome and Georgians to fight against Ottomans failed, too. Georgian writer and lexicographer Sulikhan-Saba Orbeliani went as an ambassador to Europe but he did not succeed in his mission. Georgian authorities had correspondence with European states and Vatican but they did not achieve any results. Thus, Georgia took its course towards Orthodox Russia.

Kartl-Kakheti kingdom and Russia signed a contract (the Tractate of Georgievski) in 1783. Eastern Georgia voluntarily went under the patronage and protection of Russia with the condition that its internal political system, royal governance and church autocephaly would remain unchanged.

In the beginning of XIX century Georgian Patriarchate and Abkhazian/Imeretian Catholicosates functioned simultaneously on the historic territory of Georgia.

Though political independence of kingdoms and counties was on the edge of disappearance in the most eparchies many cultural and educational activities took place but the process was slowed down because of interference of Russian government.

The incorporation of Kartl-Kakheti kingdom into Russian (1801) the issue of affiliation of The Georgian Church with The Russian Church rose on the agenda. Emperor Alexander I charged the Procurator of the Holy Synod and the governor of Georgia Al. Tarmasov to launch the process of affiliating The Georgian Church to The Russian Church immediately. The formal cause for this was the Georgievsk Tractate of 1783. The 8th article of the document referred to Georgian Catholicos-Patriarch as a constant member of the Holy Synod and stated that the future relationships of "Georgian churches" with the Holy Synod would be regulated by the special "Protocol". Anton I also took part in the elaboration of the tractate text. So, some scholars deem that Russian ecclesiastic and political government abolished autocephaly of the The Georgian Church on the ground of the tractate (though the tractate itself does not say anything about incorporation of Georgian kingdom or church with Russia).

Russian government considered that existence of the two-independent church of the same faith in one state was dangerous for the integrity of their country. The important notion is that The Russian

Church was also deprived of independence. As a result of Peter I's reforms (1722) Patriarchate was abolished and the Holy Synod was transformed into collegium which was ruled by an official – a procurator. The title "Patriarch" turned out to be unacceptable for the Russian empire. The autonomy of the church meant separation of the Orthodox Church and the state and that was unacceptable for the empire as well. The empire considered nation, the Church and the state as a whole. Thus, autocephalic The Georgian Church with its traditional hierarchy was incompatible with Russian colonial policy and with its structures.

A process of abolishment of Abkhazian Catholicosate was even more dramatic.

Abkhazian Catholicosate throne was widowed. It was ruled by Metropolitan Dositheos Kutateli da Bishop Euthymius Gaenateli.

Peasant tax was raised. It caused revolt in Imereti in 1819-1820. Archbishops Dositheos and Euthymius supported the rebels but they were caught on 4th March 1820, bags were pulled on their head and they were sent to Russia. Dositheos was an old man so he could not take such a rude treatment and he died on the road. He was buried in Ananuri Village "simply, without ceremonies". Euthymius was brought to St. Petersburg where Alexander I called him "Nero of our times".

Though The Georgian Church was subdued by The Russian Church it has not become its integral part. The name "Hexarchy" proves this. It is a Greek word and it denotes a place outside some territory. Hexarch is a ruler of such a place (in our case it is a church). academic Corneli Kekelidze notes that the term "Georgian Hexarchy" means that The Georgian Church was not incorporated and as it was "widowed" it was ruled by Russian Hexarch.

Georgian Hexarchy existed for 106 years. 18 Hexarchs replaced each other in this period. They were appointed by the emperor. They served the empire. All Russian Hexarchs except the first one were Russians. Only few of them learned Georgian language. Most of them despised local culture and traditions that became the cause of some conflicts. Some of these conflicts ended tragically.

In 1894 in "Pastir" (A Pastor) magazine the first article proving the autocephaly of the The Georgian Church was published. It was Kalistrat Tsintsadze's (then he became Catholicos-Patriarch) monograph "Autocephaly of Georgian Church".

A campaign for independence of The Georgian Church began in 1905: lots of material was published, discussions were held, councils and manifestations were organized. Unsanctioned assembly of the clergy started to work in Tbilisi seminary on 29th May 1905. Hexarch Alex called Kazaks and drove the clergy out of the hall. But the protests grew stronger. The government had to prepare for the The Russian Church Council to make a final decision on the topic. Pre-council meetings were held in Holy Synod's Conference Hall: Kirion's, Leonid's, Euthymius', Alexandre Tsagareli, prof. Alexander Khakhanashvili's and prof. Niko Marr's reports were listened to. The main basis for the restoration of autocephaly was the fact that in terms of Russian ecclesiastic ruling Orthodox missionary work could not reach its goals; people turned away from their faith and became pagans;

During the WWI, the fight for the autocephaly of The Georgian Church went into its definite phase. The Russian government's reaction was hysteric. The prosecutor elaborated a project of abolishment of Georgian Hexarchy. He intended to establish Caucasian Metropolis. That meant the full incorporation of Georgian Church. Plato who was then a Hexarch protested the plan and the intention

was not realized. Then a heretic Phyletist project was planned: Russian government planned to incorporate non-Georgian parishes in Abkhazia.

The revolution ended with victory on 25th February 1917. Empire was decentralized. The decrees of right of consciousness and self-determination were issued. The Georgian Church used this opportunity: on 12 March 1917 10 thousand representatives of the clergy gathered on a meeting in Svetitskhoveli Cathedral and they declared an independence of Georgian Church. The decree was legally signed at the first session (17th September 1917, Tbilisi). Hexarch position was abolished and Catholicos-Tatriach title was reestablished. Kirion was elected as the head of Georgian Church. Kirion (George Sadzaglishvili) was a renowned scholar. Unfortunately he was found dead in his residence on 27th June 1918. The circumstances of his death remain ambiguous.

Russian post-revolutionary government recognized the independence of The Georgian Church but it recognized the church as a national unit not a territorial one. Russian Synod and Patriarch Tychon who was elected on 5th November 1917 declared The Georgian Church graceless and summoned lay men in Georgia not to accept “autocephalist priests” and not to go to Georgian churches otherwise “they would go to hell”. The ex-Hexarch Platon said that Georgians renounced the Orthodoxy. This council (1917-1918) was attended by eastern Patriarchs. They were influenced by The Russian Church and thought that Georgia took advantage of weakening of the Russian Empire and “opposed their father like prodigal sons”.

The Georgian Church like many other religious organizations obtained more freedom in 1941-1945. “Committee of Religious Affaris” was created in the Council of Ministers of Soviet Union. The head of the council had authorized delegates in other Soviet republics. They acted like an intermediary between the church (or religious organizations) and the state. The number of Orthodox Churches in Georgia reached 29 in 1945; few books were published and a church calendar; there intensions to open a religious school and publish a permanent magazine but the state’s loyal attitude did not last for long.

The historic autocephaly of The Georgian Orthodox Church and Patriarch honor of the head of the church was approved by the Patriarchy of Constantinople on 3rd March in 1990. He sent respect letters on the issue to other Orthodox patriarchs, too.

A council of The Georgian Orthodox Church was held in 18-19th September in 1995. The decree of governance of the church was elaborated on the council. The decree is the main document which enforces the governance of the oldest church.

Every eparchy is governed by its governing high priest who is ordained by Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II. Every high priest is a member of the Holy Synod. The number of eparchies in the jurisdiction of the Georgian Apostolic Autocephalous Church is 50.