

*History*

## Seventeen Centuries of Christianity

**Roin Metreveli**

*Academy Member, National Academy of Sciences of Georgia, Tbilisi, Georgia*

**Abstract.** This study is devoted seventeen centuries period of Christianity. The outstanding fact of the celebrating of the 1700th anniversary of declaring Christianity as the state religion of Georgia demands special emphasis. As the ancient Christian country, the faith and belief in Christ has been pivotally important by preserving Georgian identity. The most perfect demonstration, while analyzing the development of historical events along with the Buddhism and Islam, Christianity as one of the ancient religions of the world has been spread almost in the whole world, but since 1 st A.D. 2000 in Georgia. The fact of celebrating by UNESCO on the international level twenty centuries standing jubilee of spread of Christianity in Georgia inspires with spiritual strength the whole nation. Declaring Christianity as the state religion was pivotally significant in the development and further success of Georgian state. © 2026 Bull. Natl. Acad. Sci. Georg.

**Keywords:** pagan, deity, preaching, religion

The year of 2026 is vitally important for Georgia from numerous points of view. Along with successful movement on the way of development our country celebrates several significant dates. The special emphasis demands the outstanding occasion of the celebrating of the 1700th anniversary of declaring Christianity as the state religion of Georgia (baptizing of Kartli). Georgia is an ancient Christian country. Since the very early times, in the dawn of A.D. period Georgians perceived the faith of Christ – the belief of Christ and His creed. Since then, and onwards during the whole existence Georgians defended the belief in Christ and by means of this approach saved their Georgian identity a lot of times. At the same time there was positive result on the opposite side. The struggle for retaining the Georgian identity and success in this field were rather significant for

Christianity as well. Throughout the whole Middle Ages the “Georgian” and “Christian” were identical notions.

Along with Buddhism and Islam, Christianity is one of the most ancient religions in the world. It is almost widespread in the whole world (in Europe, America, Australia, Africa, various areas of Near and Far East). In Georgia, Christianity has been spread since the 1st century A.D. It is not incidental that in 2000 UNESCO celebrated on international level the 2000th anniversary of spreading Christianity in Georgia.

The appearance and spreading of Christianity was rather complex process. Georgia was pagan country. As the followers of polytheism people worshipped sun, moon, stars, clouds. Each community had their own protecting deity. Interesting data on religious beliefs of ancient people are given in

archaeological excavations and pagan festivities, which are still retained (Berikaoba, Keenoba, Khatoba). Similar data are also retained in folklore. The first King of the Ancient Georgian Kingdom of Kartli, Parnavaz (3rd century B.C.) declared Armazi the supreme deity and erected its sculpture in the suburbs of Mtskheta, on the top of the high mountain between the sculptures of two other deities, Gats and Gaim. Ancient Georgians also worshipped Zadeni deity (Goiladze, 1991). Georgia had very strong ties with Greek-Hellenistic and Roman worlds. Therefore, it is not incidental, that proceeding from these ties in Georgia, the deities of the classic world were respected (Fortuna, Athena, Mars).

It must be mentioned, that in the early A.D. period, Iberia was a rather powerful state. This was caused by the close contacts with Rome and Iran, (Parthia, Achaemenid Iran). These contacts encouraged the progress of Georgia and paved way to feudalism. In comparison with paganism, the feudalism was step forward, but did not come easy. The new system, feudalism, which was necessary for the development of statehood, needed new ideology, and this ideology appeared for the world in the form of Christianity.

The origin of Christ and his great activity are described in numerous researches. Therefore, we will not deal with this issue here and highlight only the spread of Christianity in Georgia and those problems, which took place, while it has been declared as the state religion.

It must be mentioned from the very beginning, that the spread of Christianity in Georgia is directly connected with the Disciples of Christ, during whose activity (1st-2nd centuries) Georgia was outstanding with its strength and wealth and social relations (Japaridze, 2022). In the time of birth of Jesus Christ, the King of Kartli was Aderk (according to Leonti Mroveli he was the 10th King of Kartli). He is mentioned under the name Roki, as the 11th King in historical source "Conversion of Kartli," who reigned in 1-57 (in keeping with the

chronology of Prince Vakhushti). It must be mentioned, that in the same period (we mean appearance of Christ), the Imperial throne of Rome was occupied by Gaius Octavius, the son of niece of Gaius Julius Caesar and his heir, who later took the name Gaius Julius Caesar Octavian (Latin Octavianus, 27 B.C.-14 A.D.). In those difficult times, the transitive trade routes played a very important role in the development of society. A lot of such important routes crossed Georgia (Metreveli, 2019) and this gave powerful impetus to the development of the country.

Interesting data concerning the development of Christianity are given in the Gospel. All four prophets (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) unanimously point out to vigorous activity of Lord Jesus. His great contribution to the men, their spiritual elevation, miracles or any other virtue. As it is said in Matthew's Gospel, when Lord Jesus holds that his Disciples are ready to go to people in order to teach them faith of the Lord, Jesus calls them and entrusts them "power to drive out demons and heal from any disease or infirmity" (Matthew, X, 1). Gospel precise the personalities of Disciples, "the names of the Twelve Disciples are: the first Simon, named Peter and his brother Andrew, James, son of Zebedee and his brother John; Philip, Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector, James, the son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus (Judas, son of James); Thaddaeus, (Judas, son of James); Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, the one, who betrayed Him (Matthew, X, 2,3,4). The task given to them was the greatest: "Heal the diseased ones, clear from leprosy, recover from the death, expel the devils." Since then, the vigorous activity started for spreading Christianity.

The second and important stage for spreading the teaching of Christ according to the Holy Gospel starts after crucifixion of the Lord Jesus, His Resurrection and Ascension. The eleven Disciples (except of Juda) went to Galilee, where they saw the resurrected Lord Jesus and worshipped Him. "And Jesus came and spoke unto them, saying, all

power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew, XXVIII, 19).

Disciples casted lots, in order to select countries for propagation. It should be taken into account that in keeping with tradition ("Kartlis Tskhovreba"-the Life of Kartli also proves it), Georgia became a lot of the Most Holy Mother of the God, Saint Mary. In her own turn, Saint Mary entrusted this mission to Andrew the First-Called. She gave him her own, non-men-made icon and blessed his mission. Apostle did the task of the most Holy Mother of the God very well. He brought the very important element of Christianity to Georgia. He set up the first Episcopate in Atskuri. After Andrew the First-Called, Christianity in Georgia was preached by Simon Zealot and Matata. Various sources inform that preaching was carried out by other Apostles (Bartholomew, Thomas, Thaddaeus), Vigorous preaching of Christianity started, but this process was hindered by various obstacles. Apostles preached selflessly. Unfortunately, this caused tragic results. For instance, Peter preached in Judea and Antioch. He was crucified bottoms up in Rome. James preached in Jerusalem. He was beheaded there. Andrew preached in Greece, Asia Minor and Scythia. Georgian sources prove his activity in Georgia. This will be highlighted later. John spread Christianity in Ephesus, He was exiled to the island Patmos. Torture and death through crucifixion was destiny of Philip, Bartholomew, Juda-Lebeous. Leonti Mroveli connects the King Aderk's reign with the birth of Christ (Aderk fed all Kartli and Egrisi). In the first year of his reign our Lord Jesus Christ was born), Georgian source drastically takes to the 30 years later period ("the thirty years passed") and delivers us information that Elioiz from Mtskheta (Mroveli, 2008) and Longin from Karns attended crucifixion and Elioiz from Mtskheta got the robe of the Lord." It is evident that, the King of Kartli was against spreading of the influence of Christianity. Therefore, the

coming of Andrew the First-Called and Simon the Zealot to Georgia was unacceptable for the King of Kartli "He converted Megrelians and took to the province of Klarjeti (Mroveli, 2008; Alibegashvili, 2010). There are other data (from Armenian historian Ukhtanes and information of Ruisi-Urbnisi convention), which say that the first Apostle of Christ preached the Gospel throughout Georgia. Even more, as it was mentioned before, he founded Atskuri Episcopate.

King Aderk was indignant through the repudiation of heathen faith by Megrelians (Mroveli, 2008) and forcefully reconverted them. The King reprimanded severely Klarjeti lords, who say goodbye with a light heart to Andrew the First Call. According to Leonti Mroveli Simon the Zealot preached in Abkhazia and Egrisi. He died in Abkhazia and was buried there.

It must be taken into account that intensive spread of Christianity in Georgia was secured by the strength of Georgian Kingdom. In 1st-2nd centuries, the Kingdom of Iberia was held a strong state. This was mentioned in Georgian historical sources and by Roman historians Tacitus, Dion Cassius. Especially strong Iberia was in the midst of 2nd century, while the reign of King Parsman II, nicknamed "Kveli" (lavish-Geo). Along with the numerous suite Parsman was invited to Rome by Emperor Antoninus Pius (133-161). Roman political elite officially avowed Iberia's frontiers. There are some sources, which point out that some lands even had been added to Kingdom of Iberia. Iberian delegation was honoured by oblation in Capitolium. It must be mentioned as a significant event, that after that visit King Parsman's mounted statue had been raised in Rome.

By the 2nd -3rd centuries Christianity significantly strengthened its positions in Georgia, in Colchis and in Iberia as well. It is rather proper opinion, that in that time there were Christian communities in Georgia. It must be mentioned, that by then, Christianity had not been recognized as official state religion yet. Here it must be stressed,

that general situation in the country, activity of Christian communities notwithstanding of international resistance (let us recollect for instance the fighting of Roman Emperor Diocletian against Christianity), created a certain conditions to the new religion for gaining profound positions in the country. Here the following fact must be taken into account. In 313 the Edict of Milan was issued by Emperor Constantine by which the persecution of Christians was ceased. Preachers including Christians could carry out any religious service, which they considered necessary. Edict of Milan also brought back to Christian Church formerly deprived property. The Ecclesiastic Council held in Nicaea was summoned in 325 by the special order of Emperor Constantine I the Great. It is necessary to stress, that Nicaea Council was for very long time held in very difficult conditions. Finally, “Glorifying of the Evil was destroyed and disappeared. Believers and high-born were taught to worship the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”. It must be taken into account that in the list of participants of the Council is mentioned the Head of Bichvinta (Pitsunda) Episcopate Stratophilus.

Conditions of Christians had been improved in Georgia over time. Today it is out of question that Christianity was widespread in Georgia by Apostles. This is proved by means of Georgian, Greek, Latin and many other sources. Simon the Zealot and Matata as it was mentioned earlier were buried in Georgia. Emphasis should be given to the fact that the Canonical spread of Christianity by Disciples and establishing the Church gave parish autocephaly. Following that very time the coming to Georgia of Saint Nino from Cappadocia was very important event. It was early 4th century, when Georgia was ready to accept Christianity as National religion. St. Nino came to Georgia via Javakheti region. First she arrived to Urbnisi and then came to Mtskheta and settled down in the house of royal gardener. At first she stated preaching Christianity cautiously, clandestinely, but then she started to do

it in full force. She was able to commit miracles and healed diseased people. She cured a lot of hopeless people, gave others ability of childbirth. One of the most significant among her miracles was the destruction of the idols. When she saw the pagan idols erected in Mtskheta she admonished Lord to destroy them and to encourage each nation to worship the Lord God through Jesus Christ to whom the gratitude must be manifested ever and ever (Mroveli, 2008). Nino’s imploring was responded. Pagan idols were eradicated.

It happened that the Queen of Iberia Nana got sick. The illness was hard and nobody could heal her. So the royal court was forced to address Saint Nino. It must be taken into account that Saint Nino did not come to Queen and demanded to bring Queen to her. After her spells Queen immediately recovered; of course she came to believe Christ and stated: “There is no God except of Christ” (Mroveli, 2008). So Queen Nana was converted to Christianity. A lot of people avowed Christianity – the amount of parishioners increased, but King Mirian was strongly influenced by pagan faith and obstinately averted Christianity. He repudiated the exhortations of Queen Nana, who begged him to adore Christ. But within the one year after conversion of Queen King demonstrated negligence. After giving this information Georgian chronicle “Kartlis Tskhovreba” presents us story told by woman named Sidonia about conversion of King Mirian. The plot is the following: once King hunted on Tkhoti mountain (beside Mukhrani). Suddenly the eclipse occurred. King and his entourage went astray. Mirian left alone, frightened and confused. As Sidonia says, he came to his senses and implored: “I am alive in the hell, oh, God of Nino, enlighten night to me, show me the world in order to avow your name and erect cross and worship it. I shall construct the house for to pray there and I shall be obedient to the faith preached by Nino” (Mroveli, 2008). As soon as he finished his imploring everything had brightened and there was no problem to find way. King Mirian came to

believe Nino's God. Coming back from hunting the King was met triumphantly. On the next day King Mirian sent messengers to Emperor Constantine the Great and Saint Nino sent a letter to the Empress Helena. Both asked to send priests to Georgia as soon as it was possible for baptizing. At the same time King Mirian started to construct church. And then one great thing happened. The constructors could not lift the cedar pillar. And here again Saint Nino demonstrated her power. After her prayer that pillar took an appropriate position. The church was named "Svetitskhoveli", what means Quickened Pillar. This fact became the basic provision of constructing Christian churches in Georgia. King Mirian summoned nobility of the whole country, water in the river Mtkvari was blessed, clergymen blessed nation, the great baptizing took place. Georgian state, population declared Christianity as national religion. Queen Nana and King Mirian promoted this great event.

Thus, twenty centuries ago, since the 1st century in both parts of Georgia, in the East (Kartli) and the West (Kolkhida) started spreading of Christianity and seventeen centuries ago, in 326 it was declared national religion, Georgian church was Apostolic, Apostolic-Orthodox. It should be emphasized that along with the growth and development of statehood Church was growing and strengthening. The crucial thing was strengthening of the Georgian language. It also acquires the function of ecclesiastic language and sometime later we hear the words by Ioane Zosime: "Georgian language is preserved till the Doomsday, to believe Messiah, in order to inculcate speakers of any tongue by means of this language." So, this passage clearly shows that Georgian language is not only communication tool between people, but it has the greatest function, to be used at Great Judgment when the Messiah comes. The words by Giorgi Merchule are also very significant: "Kartli is that very country, where all prayers and religious services are carried out in Georgian."

Declaring of Christianity as state religion was very important event concerning the development of Georgian state. It spread up establishing of feudalism, what in its own turn was significant progress in the field of development of social relation. Christianity was humane religion, it preached love, kindness, virtue and encouraged the spiritual purification. After conversion to Christianity Georgia made closes ties with Rome and with Christian world on the whole.

Medieval public figures and people in culture vigorously reacted on conversion of Kartli. The opinions of well-known scientist, theologian St. Eprem Mtsire (there is an interesting opinion that Eprem Mtsire was the son of Vache Karetsidze, who was mentioned in essays by Sumbat Davitidze (K. Kekelidze)), whose activity unifies two great Christian cultures (Greek and Georgian) are notably worthy of note. He pointed out Greek exterior of Georgian Orthodox Church, but stressed originality of Georgian Christian culture.

Christianity carried out exclusively important role in Georgian history, Georgian state and Apostolic Orthodox Church acted together. They suffered a lot of, but positive things prevailed as well. It can be said that they came to 19th century in a sober interdependency. Being National religion of Georgia, Christianity faced hardships since 19th century, when in 1811 Tsar's authorities abolished Autocephaly of Georgian Church. Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia was expelled to Russia, St. Petersburg. The Russian Exarchy substituted for Georgian Holy Synod. Policy, launched by Russian authorities against Georgian Church caused indignation. Having got through numerous difficulties, troubles and calamities in 1917, more than a hundred years later Bishop Leonide Okropiridze and community of Georgian believers restored Autocephaly of Georgian Orthodox Church. The Head of Georgian Orthodox Church became Catholicos-Patriarch Kirion II (in lay life Giorgi Sadzaglishvili). Regrettably by that time International Community did not recognize Autocephaly of

Georgian Church. 20th century was the most difficult time for Georgian Church. In 1921 Soviet Russia set up the Soviet authority in Georgia. Through its anti-Georgian, anti-religious policy new authority put Georgia in a difficult position, but Church did not break down and continued its activity in a difficult conditions. Positive role in this field carried out Catholicos-Patriarchs Kirion II (Sadzaglishvili), Leonide (Okropiridze), Ambrosi (Khelaia), Kristepore (Tsitskishvili), Kalistrate (Tsintsadze), Melkidedek (Pkhaldze), Eprem (Sidamonidze), Davit (Devdariani). At the same time, in that period was passed Act, which was rather useful for Georgian Church. In 1943 Russian Church avowed Autocephaly of Georgian Church. It may be said that this was done by Stalin's indication. Russian and Georgian liturgies were performed by Bishop of Stavropol Anatoli and Kalistrate Tsintsadze. It must be taken into account, that Russian Church avow Patriarchal dignity of Georgian Church and its real VI position in the list of Orthodox Churches.

It must be said unequivocally, that the new stage of Georgian Christianity has been started since the election of Tskhum-Apkhazeti Bishop Ilia Shiolashvili as Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia. I had the honour to attend with my family the ceremony of his enthronement in Mtskheta, Svetitskhoveli Cathedral on 23rd of December, 1977. I believe, that since then the new stage was launched not only in the life of Georgian Church, but in the life of the whole country as well. Being just only 43, Ilia II with his keen-sighted glance overwhelmed the whole Georgia and grasped the spiritual pains of the nation. Christ's flock increased immensely, young people entered churches in great amount, at his request psalms were read throughout Georgia, preaching became permanent

event. In Sioni Cathedral each Monday the prayer services for the nation were held. Significant actions took place in order to publish ecclesiastical literature. The struggle of our remarkable Patriarch for Autocephaly resulted positively. Through these 11 years of standing efforts Georgian Orthodox Church was avowed Autocephalous on International level. This Resolution was passed on 23rd of January, 1990 by Constantinople (World) Patriarchy. It was actual approval of requirement of the Most Holy and the Most Blessed Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia Ilia II from 1979 and Georgian Church was avowed from 5th century Episcopal and from 11th century Autocephalous.

Our outstanding Patriarch counts down the Golden Age of Georgia from the time of Gregory of Khandzta. He believes that Davit IV the Builder rose country to the climax of spiritual perfectness. The history of Georgia of Golden Age proves, that even the small country is able to contribute significantly to the cultural life on international level indeed. Celebration of seventeenth century jubilee of Christianity in Georgia is the basic tool for retaining national values, those worthy traditions stored in abundance of spiritual treasury of Georgian nation. It must be noticed that along with encouraging of spiritual life our outstanding Patriarch set up anew synergetic consciousness (interconnection of spiritual and intellectual activity). Today science really takes care of revival of religious education.

On the 1700 Anniversary of conversion of Kartli, Georgian nation has perfect opportunity of unification, demonstration of mutual respect and love, to hoist as a flag the motto "Fatherland, Language, Faith" and through this approach prove the faithfulness to the homeland.

ისტორია

## ქრისტიანობის ჩვიდმეტი საუკუნე

რ. მეტრეველი

აკადემიის წევრი, საქართველოს მეცნიერებათა ეროვნული აკადემია, თბილისი, საქართველო

წინამდებარე კვლევაში განხილულია ქრისტიანობის ჩვიდმეტსაუკუნოვანი პერიოდი. განსაკუთრებულ ყურადღებას იმსახურებს ის გამორჩეული ფაქტი, რომ აღინიშნა საქართველოში ქრისტიანობის სახელმწიფო რელიგიად გამოცხადების 1700 წლის საიუბილეო თარიღი. როგორც უძველეს ქრისტიანულ ქვეყანაში, ქრისტეს რწმენას უმნიშვნელოვანესი, საკვანძო როლი ჰქონდა ქართული იდენტობის შენარჩუნებისათვის. ბუდიზმსა და ისლამთან ერთად ისტორიული მოვლენების განვითარების ანალიზი საუკეთესოდ აჩვენებს, რომ ქრისტიანობა, როგორც ერთ-ერთი უძველესი რელიგია, გავრცელდა თითქმის მთელ მსოფლიოში, ხოლო საქართველოში, იგი ახ. წ. I საუკუნიდან, უკვე 2000 წელია, არსებობს. ის ფაქტი, რომ იუნესკომ (UNESCO) საერთაშორისო დონეზე აღნიშნა საქართველოში ქრისტიანობის გავრცელების ოცი საუკუნის საიუბილეო თარიღი, მთელ ერს სულიერ ძალას მატებს. ქრისტიანობის სახელმწიფო რელიგიად გამოცხადებას გარდამტეხი მნიშვნელობა ჰქონდა ქართული სახელმწიფოს განვითარებისა და შემდგომი წარმატებისთვის.

## REFERENCES

- Alibegashvili, G. (2010). *Ts' mida Eprem Mtsire da krist'ianuli k'ult'uris sak'itkhebi* [St. Ephrem Mtsire and the problems of the christian culture]. Universali.
- Goiladze, V. (1991). *Kartuli eklesiis sataveebtan* [At the origins of the Georgian Church]. Kutaisi Printing Production Union.
- Japaridze, A. (2022). *Sakartvelos samotsikulo eklesiis istoria* [History of the Apostolic Church of Georgia] (vol. 1).
- Mroveli, L. (2008). *Tskhovreba kartvelta mepeta* [The lives of the Georgian Kings]. In *Kartlis tskhovreba* (Ed.) Metreveli R. [A history of Georgia]. Meridiani; Artanuji.

Received February, 2026