

Christianity in Eurasian Georgia

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...following Dale's and My Visit to Tbilisi,
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The Republic of Georgia lies at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, in the mountain corridor (the Caucasus Range) between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea, directly north of Armenia. In antiquity this region stood along vital branches of the Silk Road, where merchants and armies moved between Persia, the Mediterranean world, and Central Asia. The ancient Greeks and Romans called eastern Georgia *Iberia*—not to be confused with the Iberian Peninsula of Spain and Portugal. This eastern Iberia, known to Georgians as *Kartli*, became a meeting place of empires and cultures, where early trade routes also carried new ideas, including the Christian faith that would soon take root and define the nation's spiritual identity.



Early Christianity in Georgia

Christianity took root in the Georgian region of Iberia in eastern Georgia in the early fourth century CE. This made Georgia one of the earliest officially Christian nations in the world. According to long-standing tradition, Saint Nino, a Christian woman from Cappadocia, brought the faith to King Mirian III and Queen Nana around the year 326. After what is described as the miraculous healing of the queen and a divine vision during an eclipse, King Mirian adopted Christianity as the state religion.

The first Christian churches were built soon afterward, most notably at **Mtskheta**, then the royal capital. There, on the site where a local woman named Sidonia was said to have been buried holding the robe of Christ, a wooden church was raised. In later centuries this sacred site became the location of **Svetitskhoveli Cathedral**, whose present form dates to the eleventh century. Standing within its heavy stone walls today, one can feel the continuity of Georgian Christianity stretching back to the earliest centuries of the faith.

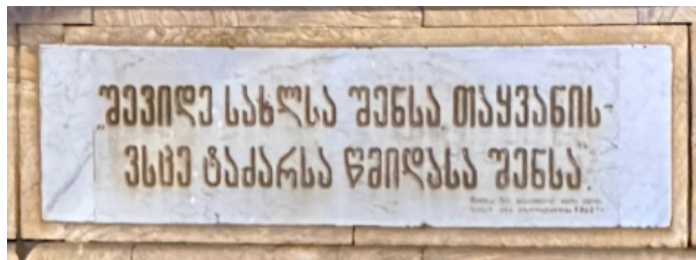
Eastern Orthodoxy and the Georgian Church

The Church that emerged in Georgia in these formative centuries developed along the **Eastern Orthodox** pattern. While neighboring **Armenia** embraced **Oriental Orthodoxy**—rejecting the Christological definitions of the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE)—the Georgian Church ultimately accepted Chalcedonian Orthodoxy, aligning itself with the Byzantine tradition. This decision profoundly shaped Georgian religious life, theology, and art.

Georgian churches thus share with the Greek and later Russian Orthodox worlds the use of icons, a highly structured liturgy, and an emphasis on the mystical presence of God in worship. Yet the Church of Georgia has always preserved its distinct language, chant, and ecclesiastical architecture. Its domed basilicas and cruciform plans represent a unique local expression of the Orthodox imagination.

The Georgian Alphabet and Christian Culture

The rise of Christianity also inspired the creation of the **Georgian alphabet**, which made it possible to translate the Scriptures and liturgical texts into the Georgian tongue. While scholars debate the precise origin of the script, it clearly drew upon Greek and Aramaic influences and reflects the need of the Christian Church to foster a written language for faith and culture.



Through the work of monastic scribes, Georgia became a center of manuscript illumination and theological scholarship. From the sixth century onward, monastic communities such as those founded by the “Thirteen Syrian Fathers” preserved both the Christian faith and the Georgian language through centuries of shifting political power.

Tbilisi: A Christian Capital in a Crossroads City

As centuries passed, the focus of Georgian life shifted from Mtskheta to Tbilisi, a city founded on the hot springs of the Kura River valley. Tbilisi became both a political capital and a crossroads between East and West—contested at times by Persians, Arabs, Mongols, Ottomans, and Russians. Despite these struggles, the Georgian Church endured, and Tbilisi remained a vital Christian center.

In the heart of this city today stands the Holy Trinity Cathedral (often called *Sameba*), completed in 2004. It symbolizes the rebirth of the Georgian Orthodox Church after centuries of foreign rule and the repression of the Soviet period. Built of pale stone in a style recalling medieval Georgian cathedrals, it dominates the skyline above the Kura River—an unmistakable sign of renewed faith and national identity.

The Church under Russian and Soviet Rule

In 1801, eastern Georgia was annexed by the Russian Empire, and by 1811 the independent Georgian Church was stripped of its **autocephaly**. Russian officials replaced Georgian bishops with Russian ones, introduced Church Slavonic in place of Georgian, and subordinated the Church to the authority of the Russian Holy Synod. The result was a deep loss of ecclesiastical independence, even as Orthodoxy remained the shared faith of both nations.

After the 1917 Revolution, Georgia briefly regained independence and restored its Church’s autonomy, but soon the Soviet regime imposed strict atheistic control. Thousands of churches and monasteries were closed or destroyed, priests were imprisoned or executed, and open religious practice was driven underground. Only during the Second World War did the Soviet government permit limited restoration of church activity, recognizing the Church’s potential to rally national morale.

Independence and Renewal after 1991

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Georgia once again became an independent republic. The **Georgian Orthodox Church** quickly re-emerged as a central force in public and cultural life. Ancient monasteries were restored, new seminaries opened, and church attendance grew dramatically. The state formally recognized the Church’s historic role while affirming freedom of religion for all citizens.

The construction of the **Holy Trinity Cathedral** in Tbilisi during the 1990s and early 2000s symbolized this renewal. Its vast dome and glowing interior stand as an architectural and

spiritual link between the Christian faith first declared at Mtskheta in the fourth century and the living, modern faith of independent Georgia today.

Conclusion

The story of Christianity in Georgia spans more than seventeen centuries—from the missionary work of Saint Nino and the royal conversion at Mtskheta, through the creation of the Georgian alphabet and the flowering of medieval monasticism, to the centuries of domination under empire and the harsh repression of the Soviet era.

Yet the faith endured. The **Svetitskhoveli Cathedral**, with its ancient stones worn smooth by centuries of pilgrims, recalls the birth of Georgian Christianity. The **Holy Trinity Cathedral** in modern Tbilisi, gleaming above the Kura River, proclaims its rebirth. Together they frame a single story: the persistence of a people who have remained Christian, Georgian, and free.