

# Georgia

**POPULATION** 4,960,951  
**GEORGIAN ORTHODOX** 70 percent  
**MUSLIM** 10 percent  
**ARMENIAN APOSTOLIC** 8 percent  
**RUSSIAN ORTHODOX** 5 percent  
**OTHER** 7 percent



## Country Overview

**INTRODUCTION** The Republic of Georgia is situated to the south of the Caucasus Mountains. It is bordered by Russia to the north, Armenia and Turkey to the south, Azerbaijan to the east, and the Black Sea to the west.

The Georgians represent one of the indigenous peoples of the Caucasus region, and the Kartvelian languages that they speak have not been conclusively linked to any other language family. Eastern Georgia (referred to as “Iberia” in older documents) was in the Persian sphere of influence, whereas western Georgia, including

the ancient kingdoms of Colchis and Lazica, had been in contact with the Greeks since Homeric times. After centuries of Arab and Turkish occupation, King David the Rebuilder (reigned 1089–1125) recaptured the capital, Tbilisi (Tiflis), ushering in a vibrant, but short-lived, period of territorial expansion and flourishing artistic and intellectual life.

The Georgian golden age reached its apogee under Queen Tamar (reigned 1184–1212) but soon thereafter succumbed to Mongol invaders from the east. Georgian lands saw little respite from warfare, devastation, and conquest in the following centuries, as Tamerlane’s hordes and then the Safavid Persians swept through the east and the Ottoman Turks extended their hegemony through the west. In hopes that the protection of a more powerful Christian nation would bring peace, the east Georgian king placed his realm under Russian suzerainty in 1783; by the mid-nineteenth century all of Georgia had been incorporated into the Russian Empire. In the wake of the collapse of the czarist regime in 1917, Georgia declared its independence. In 1921 the Red Army invaded Georgia, and it, along with Armenia and Azerbaijan, was annexed to the Soviet Union. In 1991 Georgia seceded from the U.S.S.R.

**RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE** Georgia’s constitution guarantees freedom of speech, thought, conscience, religion, and belief and prohibits discrimination on those grounds. The constitution asserts the separation of church and state, but it also recognizes the “special importance of the Georgian Orthodox Church in Georgian history.” Traditionally—and as a whole, even now—Georgians are not given to religious fanaticism and are

generally tolerant of the confessional diversity that has been part of their history for centuries.

## Major Religion

### GEORGIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

**DATE OF ORIGIN** c. 326 c.e.

**NUMBER OF FOLLOWERS** 3.5 million

**HISTORY** According to tradition the apostle Saint Andrew the First-Called brought the gospel to Georgia. Other accounts mention the apostle Saint Simon, who is said to have been buried in Abkhazia, and the saints Bartholomew and Thaddeus, who are also credited with the introduction of Christianity to the Armenians. Certainly Christianity was present in Georgia by the end of the fourth century, as evidenced by the earliest known churches.

The adoption of Christianity as the state religion in Iberia (eastern Georgia) occurred perhaps as early as 326, a quarter century or so later than in Armenia. It was from Armenia that Saint Nino the Enlightener entered Georgia and, after performing several miracles, succeeded in converting the king and queen of Iberia to the new faith. The archbishops of Iberia, whose see was in Mtsxeta, were subordinate to the Patriarchate of Antioch until 468, when the Georgian church acceded to autocephalous (independent) status within the Orthodox communion. There is some evidence that Monophysitism was introduced into Georgia during the sixth century, probably from Syria, but by the end of that century the Georgian hierarchy had clearly sided with the Chalcedonian doctrine that Jesus Christ had two natures, divine and human.

The earliest Georgian-language texts date from the fifth century, but it was after the Arab conquest of Tbilisi in 645, when the centers of intellectual and monastic activity shifted to the southwestern provinces (in what is now Turkey) or to Georgian monastic communities in Syria and Palestine, that the greatest monuments of Georgian ecclesiastical writing were produced. This was also a time of active church building and icon making, which continued through the Georgian golden era.

In 1811, several years after the annexation of Georgia to the Russian Empire, the autocephaly, or independence, of the Georgian Church was abrogated by orders



*A Russian Orthodox priest blesses a woman during a religious service in Georgia. Russian Orthodoxy was introduced upon the annexation of Georgia by the Russian Empire in 1917. © PETER TURNLEY/CORBIS.*

of the czar. For more than a century the church was governed by exarchs (bishops) appointed by the Moscow Patriarchate, of which all but the first were ethnic Russians. During this period the ancient frescoes in many Georgian churches were whitewashed, and old stone iconostases (icon screens) with the wooden ones preferred by the Russian authorities. Immediately after the declaration of Georgian independence from Russia in 1917, autocephaly was restored.

**EARLY AND MODERN LEADERS** P'et're I (467–74) was the first catholicos (primate) of the autocephalous Georgian Orthodox Church. After Bagrat III succeeded in uniting the kingdoms of eastern and western Georgia, Melkisedek' I (1010–33) became the first prelate to hold the dual title catholicos-patriarch of all Georgia. Since 1977 the catholicos-patriarch and archbishop of Mtsxeta-Tbilisi has been Ilia II (born Irakli Gudushauri-Shiolashvili in 1933).

Many Georgian monarchs took an active interest in ecclesiastic affairs. In the early fifth century King Archil is said to have convened the Georgian clergy in order to reject the Arian heresy, and King David the Rebuilder announced his reforms of the civil (and church) administration at the Council of Ruisi-Urbnisi in 1103. Also worthy of mention are the religious and civil leaders who founded monasteries in Georgia and abroad: Grigol Xandzeli, who established monastic communities in

T'ao-K'larjeti (southwest Georgia) during the ninth century; the scholar Ioane and the military leader Tor-nike, who undertook the construction of the famous Iveron ("Iberian") Monastery on Mount Athos (built 980–983); and the Byzantine general Grigol Bakurianidze, founder of the Petritsoni Monastery in Bulgaria (1083). Over the centuries a number of Georgians have been recognized as saints, including the author and social activist Ilia Ch'avch'avadze (Saint Ilia the Righteous), who was assassinated in 1907, and Patriarch Ambrose Xelaia (served 1921–27).

**MAJOR THEOLOGIANS AND AUTHORS** The leading intellectual figure of the early Georgian church was P'et're the Iberian (411–91), the founder of several monasteries in Jerusalem and elsewhere in Palestine. Numerous monastic writers contributed to the rich corpus of classical Georgian literature, including the poet and hymnographer Ioane-Zosime (tenth century), the translators Euthymius the Athonite (955–1028) and Giorgi Mta'smindeli (tenth century), and the philosophers Ephrem Mtsire (eleventh century) and Ioane P'et'rit'si (early twelfth century).

**HOUSES OF WORSHIP AND HOLY PLACES** It has been asserted that more than 10,000 churches and monasteries have been constructed in Georgia, many of them now in ruins. Some of the earliest appear to have been made of wood, such as the fourth-century construction uncovered on the site of the Svet'itsxoveli cathedral in Mtsxeta. Many fifth- and sixth-century stone churches, such as Sioni (Bolnisi) and Anchisxat'i (Tbilisi), were three-aisled basilicas, a style which subsequently evolved into the larger-scale three-naved design represented by the seventh-century church at Nek'risi. Also in the early seventh century a number of churches were laid out in a circular or octagonal ground plan, including the celebrated Jvari church overlooking Mtsxeta, the three tiny conjoined chapels at Old Shuamta, and the ruins of the cathedral at Bana in eastern Turkey. Beginning in the tenth century and throughout the golden age, great cruciform cathedrals with high domes were constructed throughout Georgia, notably Alaverdi, Svet'itsxoveli, the Bagrat cathedral at Kutaisi, and the uncommon brick church at Q'int'svisi, renowned for its frescoes. Among the numerous Georgian monasteries, mention should be made of those built next to—or even into—cliffs, with caves used as cells: Davit-Garedji and Shio-Mghvime (both begun in the sixth century) and the extraordinary

complex at Vardzia near the Turkish border (twelfth–thirteenth centuries).

**WHAT IS SACRED?** As elsewhere in the Orthodox world, icons are displayed in great numbers inside all functioning churches, and most believers also have icons at home. Relics are not as prominent as in Latin Christianity, but several are displayed in Georgian churches or referred to in chronicles.

**HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS** The Georgian Church observes, by and large, the same holy days, fasts, and commemorations of the dead as do other Orthodox communities and establishes their dates according to the Julian calendar, which is thirteen days behind the modern (Gregorian) calendar. Easter is the greatest of the holy days, celebrated in a liturgy that begins at midnight with the solemn procession of icons around the church and lasts almost until daybreak. Some of these observances have distinctly local features, such as the strewing of box tree branches on the church floor on Palm Sunday (in Georgian, Bzoba [the Box Feast]). The principal Orthodox fasts are during Lent (Didi marxva), Advent, the two weeks preceding the Dormition of Mary (Mariamoba, 28 August [15 August iO. Si]), and from the Monday eight days after Pentecost until the feast of Saints Peter and Paul (P'et're-p'avloba, 12 July [29 June iO. Si]). Departed souls are commemorated on Meatfare Saturday (Xortsielis shabati), nine days before Lent; Soul Saturday (Sulis shabati), the day before Pentecost; and on the second, third, and fourth Saturdays of Lent. Of special significance to Georgians are Saint Nino and Saint George, each of whom has two feast days each year. Major cathedrals also have annual celebrations.

**MODE OF DRESS** Georgian liturgical vestments are comparable to those in other Orthodox churches. As ordinary garments, clerics of all ranks wear black robes with head coverings. All bishops wear cylindrical hats of roughly similar shape; that of the catholicos-patriarch is adorned with a large cross, whereas those of archbishops have smaller crosses, and those of bishops are unmarked. Georgian prelates also wear elaborate pendants and crosses—those of highest rank may wear as many as three—and carry a staff.

**DIETARY PRACTICES** Except for fasts, which are regulated by Orthodox conventions, Georgians are not subject to any special dietary restrictions.

**RITUALS** The Georgian Orthodox liturgy continues to be celebrated in the classical Georgian language of the ninth through the twelfth centuries, written in the old ecclesiastical script (*nusxuri*) rather than the secular *mxe-druli* script that has been used to write Georgian since the Middle Ages. The modes and polyphony of Georgian liturgical chant are distinctive and share some features with Georgian folk song.

On feast days, especially in rural areas, numerous popular observances not sanctioned by the Orthodox hierarchy still occur at or near churches. Worshipers commonly circumambulate the church three times counterclockwise, sometimes leading animals to be slaughtered, whose meat will be served at a banquet (*supra*) within or near the church precincts. Even in Tbilisi, on the feast of the Dormition of Mary, worshipers leading sheep or bearing chickens crowd into churchyards, where they light candles and present written prayer requests to the priest. Some churches are pilgrimage sites, especially for people seeking healing or the birth of children. One widespread practice, even when little remains of the church save a pile of stones, is the lighting of beeswax candles, which are then affixed to the wall and left to burn out. As in some neighboring regions, Georgians visiting a shrine or other sacred site may tear off a strip of fabric from their clothing and tie it around a branch of a nearby tree known as a “wish tree” (*nat'vris xe*).

**rites of passage** The sacrament of baptism is administered according to Orthodox norms and is followed by chrismation (the equivalent of Catholic confirmation). Although it is normally a ritual for infants, because of Soviet-era restrictions on the practice of religion, many adolescent or even adult Georgians have only recently been baptized, including former members of the Communist Party. During the Orthodox wedding ceremony, the couple wear crowns and are referred to as “king and queen” (*mepe-dedopali*) for a short while afterward.

After death the body is exposed in the home for a day or two so that family members, friends, and neighbors can pay their respects. A funeral service may be held in the church, but this is not obligatory. Before taking the coffin out of the house, the pallbearers carry it around the room three times counterclockwise. Funeral banquets take place after burial, on the 40th day after death and, finally, on the first anniversary, to mark the end of mourning. On subsequent anniversaries of a per-

son's death, family members will visit the grave site, light candles, and eat a small commemorative meal there.

**MEMBERSHIP** In principle anyone can become a member of the Georgian Orthodox Church through conversion and baptism, but the contemporary church has been strongly linked to Georgian ethnic consciousness and has few non-Georgian members. In earlier times this relation was conceived in quite different terms. The tenth-century writer Giorgi Merchule defined Georgia as the land “where the liturgy is celebrated in the Georgian language.” At the time those lines were written, and especially in the following centuries, a wide variety of home languages were spoken by those who heard the divine liturgy in Georgian. Even as recently as the seventeenth century Georgian villagers were said to refer to all Orthodox Christians as *Kartvelebi* (that is, Georgians) regardless of their language or nationality.

**SOCIAL JUSTICE** Since the end of Soviet rule, the Georgian Orthodox Church has undertaken a number of humanitarian activities, such as operating soup kitchens, homes for the elderly, and a shelter for homeless children.

**SOCIAL ASPECTS** Under the Georgian constitution the church has no role in regulating marriage, divorce, and related matters. There is some opposition to abortion among believers, but it remains legal in Georgia.

**POLITICAL IMPACT** The Orthodox Church was integrated into the feudal politico-economic order of medieval Georgia. Many monasteries and bishoprics held fiefs, along with the serfs living on the land, and some accumulated sizable holdings through gifts and bequests from the nobility. In 1103 King David the Rebuilder granted the powerful office of *mt'signobart-uxutsesi* (grand chancellor, first in rank among the royal ministers) to his close advisor Giorgi, bishop of Ch'q'ondidi. For centuries afterward the chancellorship was combined with the west Georgian episcopal see in question. Under the Soviet and post-Soviet administrations the church leadership has had no official political role, but the catholicos-patriarch Ilia II has been a highly visible public figure for many years, and his opinions have considerable influence.

**CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES** In contemporary Georgia the Orthodox Church has been caught in the crossfire

between traditionalists, who oppose ecumenism, and representatives of the minority religious communities, especially the newly arrived Protestant churches, who object to what they see as the favored status of the Orthodox Church. In 1997, under pressure from the traditionalists, the Holy Synod of the Georgian Orthodox Church withdrew its membership in the World Council of Churches. In September 2003 thousands of Georgians took to the streets to protest a proposed agreement on religious matters between the Georgian state and the Vatican, which was canceled soon afterward by representatives of the Georgian president. On the other hand, the church leadership has condemned the activities of the most extreme self-proclaimed defenders of Orthodoxy, such as the Basilists (violent splinter groups inspired by the excommunicated priest Basili Mkalavishvili).

**CULTURAL IMPACT** As in Armenia and the Slavic lands, the introduction of Christianity to Georgia was accompanied by the creation of an alphabet for the purposes of translating the Scriptures and other religious texts into the vernacular. Surprisingly the oldest known inscriptions in Georgian, which date to about 430–40, are located in what is now Israel. Within a couple of generations after the adoption of Christianity, communities of Georgian monks were active in Palestine and Syria, where, over the centuries, they translated numerous works from Greek, Syriac, and other languages and also wrote original hagiographies of Georgian saints. In the tenth and eleventh centuries major monasteries were established on Mount Athos and in Bulgaria, and these attracted some of the most gifted translators and philosophers of the period. At the same time, centers of learning were founded within Georgia, of which the most celebrated were the academies at Gelati and Iq'alto.

The first Georgian printing press was installed during the reign of King Vakht'ang VI (reigned 1711–24). Many of the books produced by this press were intended for use in the monastery schools and seminaries then being opened at the initiative of Patriarch Doment'i III (served 1704–25). This educational work was continued by the distinguished patriarch Ant'on I (served 1744–88), who was himself the author of many books, including a highly influential grammar of the Georgian written language.

## Other Religions

The medieval Georgian chronicles mention military campaigns to subdue unruly “pagans” dwelling in the remote highland valleys of northern Georgia. Some mountain tribes accepted the state religion; others, however, resisted or fled further upland. A handful of Georgians living in the northeastern mountain provinces of Pshavi and Xevsureti have continued to practice a syncretic religion centered on the veneration of divine beings known as “children of God” (*xvtishvili*) or “icons” (*xat'i*). The Pshav-Xevsur religious system appears to have resulted from the restructuring of inherited pre-Christian beliefs in light of concepts appropriated from Orthodox Christianity and medieval Georgian feudalism. The highland communities imagine themselves to be the “vassals” (*q'ma*) of their tribal *xat'i*, which in turn is subordinate to God, the invisible sovereign of this cosmological hierarchy.

The first of the world religions to establish itself in Georgia was Judaism. A Jewish community has been present since ancient times in the old capital of Mtskheta; synagogues are also found in major cities, such as Tbilisi and Kutaisi, and even in the town of Oni in the highlands of northwestern Georgia. It has been estimated that as many as 100,000 Jews once lived in Georgia. After Soviet authorities relaxed emigration restrictions in the 1970s, most Jews left the country, and fewer than 10,000 remain. In September 1998 the Georgian government officially celebrated 2,600 years of Judaism in Georgia.

Islam has been present on Georgian territory since shortly after the time of Muhammad, brought by the Arab armies who conquered much of the eastern half of the country. A significant portion of the Georgian populace later converted in those ancient southwestern provinces that were incorporated into the Ottoman Empire. Some of these lands were returned to Georgia in the nineteenth century, and they now constitute the autonomous region of Adjara (Ach'ara). Most Georgian Muslims, however, remain within the borders of Turkey. The majority of Muslims residing in the Georgian republic are Azeris or members of other traditionally Muslim ethnic groups.

Other religions that have long-standing roots in Georgia include the Armenian Apostolic Church (the majority faith of Georgia's Armenian community, which is centered in Tbilisi and the districts adjacent to the Armenian border) and Yezidism (the syncretic religion

practiced by most of Georgia's Kurdish population). European missionaries first introduced Roman Catholicism in the thirteenth century. The present-day Catholic community has been estimated to number about 50,000.

Russian Orthodoxy was introduced upon the annexation of Georgia by the Russian Empire, and it assumed a hegemonic status when the autocephaly of the Georgian church was abolished from 1811 to 1917. Since the restoration of autocephaly, the practice of Russian Orthodoxy in Georgia has continued, mostly among ethnic Russians. Also introduced during the czarist period were small numbers of Old Believers and the pacifist Dukhobors, who settled in the Ninot'sminda district of southwest Georgia about 150 years ago to escape persecution. In the late Soviet period as many as 6,000 Dukhobors lived in the village of Gorelovka and several adjacent hamlets. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, about two-thirds of the Dukhobors have left Georgia.

Since independence a number of new religious communities have appeared in Georgia. Some of these were introduced by foreign missionaries, while others seem to have arisen through local initiative. The Jehovah's Witnesses, who have an estimated membership of between 15,000 to 36,000, have drawn the most attention. This religion has had a measure of success among marginalized segments of the population but has provoked the opposition—on occasion expressed through physical violence—of ultra-Orthodox zealots. Attempts have also been made by traditionalist politicians to ban the Jehovah's Witnesses. Other recently introduced Protestant denominations include Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, the Salvation Army, and various Pentecostal churches. Their combined membership probably numbers a few tens of thousands. Since the last years of Sovi-

et rule, a small number of young urban Georgians have become interested in Buddhism and other Eastern religions. A Hare Krishna temple has opened in Tbilisi, and this group has also been involved in charitable work.

*Kevin Tuite*

*See Also* Vol. I: *Christianity, Eastern Orthodoxy, Islam*

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