

Bishop Kirion, *Kulturnaya rol' Iverii v istorii Rusi*. Tiflis: Tipografiia T. P. Kozlovskago, 1910. 450 pp.



By Dn. Lasha Tchantouridze

Bishop Kirion's *Cultural Role of Iveria [Georgia]*¹ in *History of Russia*, originally published in 1910, was reprinted and published in 2005 by a group of Georgian scholars, soon after the Holy Synod of the Georgian Church numbered Catholicos-Patriarch Kirion II among the saints. A prominent scholar and an active ecclesiastic and social figure, Bishop Kirion (1855-1918) worked hard for the restoration of independence of the Church of Georgia.

Autocephaly of the Georgian church, which dates back to the 5th century was abolished by the Russians in 1811, shortly after annexing Georgian kingdoms.

Bishop Kirion completed *Cultural Role of Iveria in History of Russia* in 1909, while in exile in Kuriash-Sanaksar monastery in Russia. He had written the manuscript in Georgian, and then translated it in Russian at the urging of his friends. Bishop Kirion's supporters arranged for its publication in Tbilisi, the capital city of Georgia. The volume never found a wide distribution, chiefly because both its author and content irritated Russian authorities. Bishop Kirion's main thesis in this book could be summarized in a couple of sentences: Russian culture in general, and the Church of Russia more specifically have been significantly influenced by Georgian culture,

¹ Iveria is an ancient name of eastern Georgia that is sometimes used to denote the whole country.

tradition, and customs, both ecclesiastic and secular. More than six hundred years separate the two neighbouring countries in their adoption of Christianity as the official or dominant religion – Georgia embraced Christianity soon after the first Ecumenical Council in 325, and Russia regards the 988 baptism of Kiev in as the beginning of Christianity in that country.

A simple thesis that an older Christian culture influences a younger one would not normally be seen as a highly controversial issue, but for Russian state and church authorities in the beginning of the 20th century such a claim was simply unacceptable. A number of motives occasioned their inflexible approach: Russians opposed the attempts at restoration of autocephaly of the Georgian Church, they opposed self-determination of peoples of the Russian empire, for some of them Orthodoxy was simply synonymous with the notion of being Russian, and for some the idea of a small country influencing the very identity of a huge empire was ridiculous. Bishop Kirion was exiled to various parts of Russia, he was forbidden to travel to Georgia, and was basically kept under house arrest from 1908 to 1915 not because he committed crimes against the church or the state, but for his academic research and ideas. The imperial Russia portrayed Orthodoxy as the center-piece of its own national and imperial identity, but by the same logic Georgia, which acquired autocephaly from the Antiochians in the 5th century, had the rights for both national and church independence, and the regime could accept neither.

Soon after the first Russian revolution in 1917, the one which deposed Nicholas II and proclaimed a republic, the Georgian Apostolic Orthodox Church proclaimed its autocephaly restored. In September 1917, the Holy Synod enthroned Bishop Kirion as Catholicos-Patriarch of Georgia. Soon after the October 25 (November 7), 1917, Bolshevik revolution in Russia, Georgia seceded from the Russian empire, and on May 26, 1918, the Democratic Republic of Georgia was proclaimed. On June 27 of the same year, enemies of Georgia murdered Catholicos-Patriarch Kirion II at his quarters in Martqofy monastery. In March 1921, the Russian Bolshevik-communists invaded and overthrew the independent Democratic Republic of Georgia, and Georgia once again became part of the Russian empire, now

re-organized with Soviet flavour. The Church of Georgia did manage to keep its autocephaly; however, and the Moscow Patriarchate acknowledged it in 1943, as part of a deal it struck with the communist government in Moscow. In 1991, Georgia once again gained independence from the Russian empire, and on October 17, 2002, the Holy Synod of the Apostolic Orthodox Church of Georgia canonized Hieromartyr Kirion II, Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia. He is commemorated on June 27.²

Cultural Role of Iveria in History of Russia represents the most significant and detailed research in Bishop Kirion's scholarly output. It has five chapters. The first two chapters are described by the author as sort of "general introduction" to this particular area of study (p. v). The third chapter is dedicated to review of Russian scholarship on Russian historiography and chronicles. The fourth chapter is identified by the author as "the most important one" (p. v) in the volume as it addresses parallel motifs in the Georgian and Russian primary chronicles (pp. 213-300). The fifth chapter is a supplementary one, as the author originally intended to publish the included material as separate additions to the volume.

Throughout the book, Bishop Kirion provides evidence of Georgian influence on Russian church traditions and customs. For instance, certain aspects of Russian church architecture originate in Georgian architectural tradition (p. iii, p. 110). A Georgian service book, *Zhamny-Gulany*, a 10th century book that included in one volume the Psalms and the Hours, served as a guide for a Slavonic service book of the same composition used in Russia, and unknown in the Byzantine church (p. iii). Bishop Kirion also notes particular distinct elements of Georgian iconography found in medieval and later Russian icons (pp. 104-107). The author notes that according to Archdeacon Paul of Alepo, who accompanied Patriarch Macarius of Antioch on his journey to Moscow in the second half of the 17th century, he read the Gospel in Georgian on Patriarchal Liturgy, and proclaimed the Litany of Catechumens in Georgian as well. Both Patriarchs and the Tsar were present at this service (pp. 103-104). Bishop Kirion convincingly argues that in the

² St Kirion's life is available on the website of the Orthodox Church in America <www.oca.org>. It is described there among the lives of the saints commemorated on June 27.

17th century Moscow Georgian Orthodox tradition was viewed with due respect and admiration.

Bishop Kirion offers rich comparative study of languages, folk customs, and traditions in Georgia and Slavic countries, based on his own research as well on research of other scholars, both from Russia and elsewhere. He cites studies that argue that *glagolitsa*, the first Slavonic alphabet created by Sts Cyril and Methodius, and the predecessor of modern Cyrillic, originally borrowed certain letters from church-Georgian. Studies published in Russia in the 19th century identified nine such letters (p. 97).³ From his own analysis of the 17th century Slavonic texts, Bishop Kirion identifies further eight letters that either copy Georgian equivalents or much resemble them (p. 97).⁴ Further, the author provides an extensive list of Russian words that find their roots in Georgian (pp. 125-133).

Analysis of pre-Christian Georgian culture, its subsequent baptism, and adoption of worthy customs, terminology, and traditions in ecclesiastic practices and vocabulary offers a further insight into Bishop Kirion's scope and research. Rich material collected for the volume could serve as the basis for further investigation into many different areas. Bishop Kirion argues that as the only carrier of polyphonic tradition in church music, the Georgian church could not have been influenced by the Byzantine or any other church music tradition – the church choirs in all other Orthodox traditions, except Georgian, historically have sung in unison. Most likely, the 4th century Byzantine bishops, priests, and deacons, invited by King Mirian to give the Georgian church an institutional make-over and support, found rich and well developed music culture in the country and quite sensibly kept it (p. 100). Further, the author describes a number of pre-Christian Georgian holidays and customs, and their influence on pre-Christian Slavic customs, as well as

³ The Georgian script is much older than Slavic alphabet – the oldest undisputed inscription in Georgian dates back to the beginning of the 5th century AD. There are much older inscriptions as well, but their dates are disputed by scholars. *Glagolitsa* or glagolitic alphabet, the first Slavic script, was developed in the 10th century AD.

⁴ The origins of the Georgian alphabet are not certain, as scholars debate whether it was derived from ancient Greek, Arameic, Hebrew, Armenian or any other source. All the existing theories on the origins of the Georgian alphabet have more weaknesses than they have strengths.

on Christian holidays and customs in Georgia, Russia, and Ukraine (pp. 117-124).

The central thesis of *Cultural Role of Iveria in History of Russia* finds its full support in the fourth chapter of the volume, regarded by the author as the most important one. This chapter represents textual analysis and comparison of Georgian and Russian primary chronicles. Bishop Kirion quotes passages and stories from the Russian Primary Chronicle (*Povest Vremennyx Let* or *Tale of Bygone Years*), and compares them with passages from various Georgian chronicles collectively known as *Kartlis Tskhovreba* (*Life of Georgia*). For example, the heroic story of Ivan Susanin, who sacrificed himself to save the Tsar, is a mirror image of an earlier Georgian story of Monk-priest Theodore of village Qvelta, who in 1609 was martyred by the invading Turks (pp. 114-115). The opening passage of the Russian Primary Chronicle represents a literary translation of the 11th century Georgian chronology by [Monk] Sumbat (p. 223).⁵ The Russian chronicle borrows a number of transitional phrases, general tone and technique of story-telling from the Georgian one. For instance, transitional phrases such as, "thus begins this story," "but [let us] return to the above," "to this day" are very common in both chronicles (pp. 224-225).

The Georgian chronicle opens with the description of the origins of Georgians derived from a grandson of Iapheth (Japheth), a son of Noah, and tells a story of settling the Georgian lands. Likewise, the Russian chronicle opens with a story that identifies the descendants of Iapheth as the founders of Russia, and tells a story of settling the Russian lands (p. 225). Further, the Georgian chronology explains that the ancient Georgian lands were named after Georgian heroes – Kartli was named after Kartlos, Hereti after Heros, Egrisi after Egros, etc. – who settled in particular areas of Georgia after exiting Babylon (the mixing of languages story). The Russian chronicle repeats this method of explaining the origins of the names of ancient Slavic peoples, who settled in their new lands after God mixed languages in Babylon (pp. 227-228).

⁵ Sumbat wrote his chronology to explain the origins of the Bagrationi dynasty, the rulers of Georgia.

The opening section of the Georgian chronicle represents a collection of stories without chronology or significant dates. The first date mentioned (in Sumbat's chronology) is AD 826. The Russian chronicle follows the same logic: a collection of stories opens it without mentioning any dates, and the first date named is AD 852 (p. 234). Further, the Georgian chronicle dates events from the beginning of the world alongside with a traditional Georgian dating method. The same method of dating is employed by the authors of the Russian chronicle (pp. 234-235).

Bishop Kirion provides many similar passages from the two chronicles. The volume is replete with interesting observations and commentary. It should be noted that such a close following does not necessarily mean that the events described in the Russian chronicle were invented by its authors. There could have been such cases, and the author points out a couple of those, but most likely the authors of the Russian chronicles were borrowing the style and method, and perhaps dramatizing certain events, and freely interpreting others.

In the beginning of his book, St Kirion notes that, sadly, Russians know very little about Georgians, with whom they share Orthodox faith, and their history (p. 1). Nothing much seems to have changed regarding this fact since 1910: not only knowledge about Georgia and its church did not increase among the Russians, but generally negative view of this small country dominates Russian society today. According to Moscow-based VCIOM public opinion survey, in October 2006, sixty per cent Russians regarded Georgia as a "bandit state."⁶

About the Reviewer: Deacon Lasha Tchantouridze, PhD, of St Nicholas parish in Narol, MB, is an adjunct member of the St Arseny Orthodox Christian Theological Institute, the University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg, MB.

⁶ "Georgia Pictures *protiv* "TASS upolnomochen zayavit'..." *Kommersant* daily, Moscow, October 16 2006.