



## HISTORY, POLITICS, PRIMARY SOURCE STUDIES

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### ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY IN GEORGIA DURING THE SAFAVID PERIOD\*

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#### **Abstract**

The primary focus of the article is to examine the religious landscape in 17th-century Georgia. It addresses two independent yet interconnected issues: the challenges faced in the expansion of Islam among the Georgian populace and the factors that impeded the effectiveness of Catholic missionaries in their efforts to promote Catholicism in Georgia. In the first instance, the objective factors are emphasized, explaining why Islamic nations—specifically, Safavid Iran—chose to compel the feudal elite to convert to Islam, often resulting in only superficial adherence to the faith. They were, however, unable to mandate that the entire population adopt Islamic beliefs. The text explores various facets of the interactions between Muslims and Chr-

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istians, though it pays limited attention to the role of converted Georgians in Safavid Iran. In the second case, it is highlighted that a significant barrier to the spread of Catholicism was the disregard for local specifics, coupled with the often arrogant attitude of Catholic missionaries. This attitude was characteristic of European Catholicism towards Eastern Christianity during this period, particularly in dealings of Catholic missionaries with local Orthodox clergy and populations. The reasons behind the failure of Catholicism's expansion are examined through the lens of Edward Said's concept of 'Orientalism.'

**Keywords:** Georgia, Safavid Iran, Islam, Christianity, Catholic Missionaries, Orientalism.

## **Introduction**

The paper has two sections. The first deals with Islam in Georgia and relations between Muslims and Georgian Christians during the Safavid period. The second analyzes the vision of Europeans, Catholic missionaries, and travelers on Christianity and Christians in Georgia.

Orthodox Christianity played a special role in the history of Georgia. The majority of the population of the country, practically surrounded by the Islamic world, remained Christian.

Towards the end of the 15th century, Georgia was fragmented into small kingdoms and principalities. In eastern Georgia, there were the kingdoms of Kartli and Kakheti; to the south, the principality of Samtskhe-Saatabago (Meskheta); in western Georgia, the kingdom of Imereti and the principalities of Odishi (Samegrelo) and Guria.

In the early 16th century, Georgia became a conflict zone between the Ottoman Empire and Safavid Iran. The Treaty of Amasya

(962/1555) temporarily ended the struggle between the Ottomans and the Iranians for control of the Caucasus. According to Iskandar Munshi, by this peace treaty, Iran and the Ottoman Empire divided Georgia as follows: Kartli and Kakheti (Eastern Georgia) and part of Samtskhe (South Georgia) went to Iran, while a larger part of Samtskhe and western Georgia went to the Ottomans. (Iskandar Munshi, 1969: 20). Thus, Iran recognizes the right of the Ottoman Empire to western Georgia, while the latter recognizes Iranian control over the eastern part of the country.

This division, with small changes, despite several Ottoman-Perisian wars lasted until the 1720s.

Muslim empires had different approaches in Georgia. The Ottomans aimed at total Islamization in the southwest and non-interference in the west. The Iranians, for their part, sought to convert the elites in the east without affecting the Christian majority.

The second part of the article examines the perception of Christianity and Christians in Georgia by Europeans (primarily Catholic missionaries) during the research period.

After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the nations of Western Europe set out to explore new ways of access to the East, both by sea and by land. The Roman Catholic Church has been particularly committed to this approach. The spread of the Catholic faith among Eastern Christians was of considerable political importance. Catholic missionaries thus deployed their efforts within the Ottoman and Safavid empires, as well as in the South Caucasus under their rule, targeting local Christian communities. It should be noted that even before the fall of Constantinople in 1329, the center of propagation of Catholicism had been transferred from Smyrna (present-day Izmir) to Tbilisi, capital of Georgia. The Catholic missions were very active in Geo-

rgia during the 14th and 15th centuries, before being interrupted in the 16th century and resuming at the beginning of the 17th century.

Catholic missionaries were sent from Rome by a special organization called Propaganda Fide. From time to time, they write letters to Rome describing the state of the country.

### **Attempts to Islamize Georgians: Causes and effects**

As a result of his four military campaigns of Shah Tahmasp I in Eastern Georgia in 1540-1554, the Safavid Dynasty's control strengthened gradually. The military campaigns were targeted at appointing the loyal people as Governors of eastern Georgia and Islamizing them. Thus, 'Georgian districts were brought under control with local governors being appointed from, and taxes being paid to the centre.' (Roemer, 1986: 246-47). Despite certain autonomy and regardless of the fact that the majority of the population remained Christians, the transition from vassalage to integration was underway. It is within the context that we should consider the resettlement of Georgians into Iran for the purpose of revitalization of its agriculture and appointing the Islamized Georgian nobility at high positions at the Safavid Court. Unlike the rural population, it did not take long for the Georgian nobility to turn to Islam for purely career reasons.

R. Savory points out that "the Caucasian elements' (or the 'third force' distinct from the Turcoman and Persian elements) appeared around the Royal Court already in the reign of Shāh Tahmāsb I after his successive campaigns into the Caucasus, especially in the Georgian kingdoms." (Savory, 1961: 84-85). Although during the reign of Shāh Tahmāsb, the Georgians did not play a particularly significant part in the Iranian politics and military affairs, even before Shāh 'Abbās I came to power, the Caucasian element had a strong presence in Iran. Therefore, we agree with H. Maeda that "the prototype of the ghulām corps of Shāh 'Abbās had already been prepared". (Maeda, 2011: 165).

Following the four military campaigns conducted by Shah Abbas I in the 1610s, the region of Kakheti suffered considerable and irremediable damage, both in terms of human losses and massive displacement of populations towards the Iranian provinces of Fereydu (near Isfahan), Khorasan, and Mazandaran.

The vast majority of Georgians who emigrated to Iran, whether by force or by choice, converted to Islam. Beyond their presence in rural areas, the Georgians held influential positions in the political and military spheres of the Safavid Empire. The exiled nobles converted to Islam almost immediately to advance their careers. As for the rural population, the process seems to have been quite lengthy.<sup>31</sup> Naturally, this led to the loss of part of their identity (Christian-Georgian). The exiled Armenians found themselves in a different situation - Shah Abbas practically granted them a monopoly on foreign trade. Christian Armenians, according to the Shah, would have easier relations with co-religionist Europeans. Accordingly, the Islamization of Armenians (except for the same administration and military sphere) was not implemented.

Shah Abbas relocated the merchants of Kartli, notably those of Tbilisi, to the outskirts of Isfahan, following the example of their Armenian counterparts settled in Jolfa. (Arakel Davrizhetsi, 1974: 36). According to the account of the German traveler Adam Olearius, the Georgian merchants and craftsmen were accommodated in Hasana-bad, a district of Isfahan. (Cit. Zhordania, 1962: 177). E. Kaempfer reports that in 1680 the Georgian population of Isfahan was 20,000. (Kaempfer, 1984: 204).

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<sup>31</sup> By Nader Shah's 1739 firman, Georgians living in Iran, along with other non-Muslims, were exempted from the poll tax (*jizya*), which confirms that in addition to Muslim Georgians, Christian Georgians also lived in Iran during this period. (See Kutsia, 2002: 127).

Gradually, the Georgian Muslims became the central element of the armed forces of Shah Abbas. The latter had understood that the economic and political development of Iran, as well as the strengthening of its eastern and western borders, and ultimately, the preservation of the territorial integrity of the country, could only be assured if the central power enjoyed a certain autonomy vis-à-vis the Qezelbash troops, and if the military forces were directly subordinated and loyal to the sovereign.

Georgians were regarded as distinguished warriors. Concerning Shah 'Abbas's army, Pietro Della Valle, the Italian traveller, wrote: 'today, the Georgians are crucial to the Persian army, the best part thereof. (Pietro Della Valle, 1745: 69). Thomas Herbert, an Englishman who visited Shiraz in 1627, points out that: 'owing to their good looks, willpower and loyalty, the Georgian warriors are held at high esteem by the Persians, so much so to be appointed the commanders, especially so in the battles against the Persians' archenemy, the Ottomans'. (Herbert, 1677: 155).

As part of his policy of assimilating indigenous populations and restructuring ethnically homogeneous regions, Shah Abbas orchestrated the movement of Turkmens to Kakheti province. This maneuver aimed to establish a strategic base in the Caucasus, while transforming the Kakhetians deported to Iran into an agricultural workforce and a loyal military force. The sovereign seems to have sought solutions to facilitate coexistence between the local inhabitants and the Muslim Turcoman tribes newly settled in this Christian province.

The Safavid Empire did not have a homogeneous policy towards non-Muslim populations. Shah Abbas adapted his strategies according to the circumstances and political stakes of the moment.

The viewpoint of the eminent theologian and jurist Sheykh Baha'i on coexistence between Muslims and Christians deserves spec-

ial attention. He considered that Muslims were not required to prohibit Christians from consuming pork or alcohol. Furthermore, to preserve their faith, Muslims living in a Christian environment could, under certain circumstances, pretend to consume these prohibited foods. This concealment was considered acceptable in specific situations, in order not to compromise their mission in the service of Islam. Baha'i also details the conditions under which certain products offered by a Georgian, such as grape juice, honey or vinegar, could be considered lawful from a religious point of view. (Bahā al-Din, cit. Abisaab, 2004: 65).

Although undated, Baha'i's views on food and products made by Georgian Christians appear to have been influenced by the context created in Kakheti following Shah Abbas' military campaigns. The establishment of these rules by Shah Abbas aimed to promote social integration in depopulated areas or those with a Christian majority.

Now I want to return to the situation in Georgia.

King Rostom implemented in Kartli (1631-1658) the 'compromise policy' developed towards the end of the reign of Shah Abbas I. Rostom, a Georgian prince converted to Islam and raised in Iran, held a prestigious position at the court of the Shah before being designated sovereign of Georgia. The Georgian aristocracy recognised the benefits of an alliance with Persia. This diplomatic approach allowed the preservation of the internal organization of Kartli and the perpetuation of the Bagrationi dynasty, provided that they embraced the Muslim faith and accepted the title of vali, representing the Shah at the provincial level.

This policy of compromise, which lasted almost until the end of the Safavid dynasty, implied that the Georgian sovereigns, as vassals, enjoyed considerable autonomy in managing the internal affairs of their kingdom. Iran's interest in this conciliatory approach and the

maintenance of close relations with Georgia was motivated by the need to ensure the security of the empire's north-western border.

Jean-Baptiste Tavernier describes the situation prevailing in Georgia as follows: It was only a kingdom where all the people mingled with Mohammedans who took a foot there, and the king of Persia, having sown divisions in the country, has led things so well to his advantage that he makes two kingdoms out of it. He only calls them provinces and has placed governors there for twenty-five or thirty years. They are princes of the country and, to be clothed with this dignity, they must turn into Mohammedans. As soon as they are raised there, they take the title of king and, as long as the race lasts, the king of Persia cannot dispossess their children... The law that the kings of Persia imposed on these princes, he could not have succeeded his father if he had not embraced Mohammedanism... At the same time, the administration of justice is carried out exclusively by the Christians of the kingdom, without any intervention by Muslims, not even that of the sovereign. (Tavernier, 1981: 48-49).

The famous traveler John Chardin, who stayed in Georgia for almost a year at the beginning of the 1670s writes: The viceroy of Georgia is named Chahnavaz-khan (the nephew and heir of Rostom). He is of the royal blood of the last sovereigns of that country, but he made himself Mahometan so as to be able to be viceroy under the Persian.

According to another French traveler and botanist, Tournefort, who visited Tbilisi at the beginning of the 18th century, the king of Persia is obliged to spend much more in Georgia than he gains from it. To maintain in his interests the Georgian lords, who are the masters of the country and who could give themselves to the Turks, he grants them large pensions (Tournefort: 1988: 67; 1982: 191).

On the one hand, King Rostom undertook the restoration of Christian religious buildings, granted them subsidies, and ensured the protection of high-ranking clerics; on the other hand, he remained committed to his Muslim faith and initiated the construction of mosques.

About the mosque in Tbilisi, Chardin writes: There is no mosque in Tiflis, although this city belongs to a Mohammedan Empire, and that it is governed with the whole province by a Prince who is also so. Persians did what they could to build it; but they were unable to overcome it. The people immediately rose up and, at gunpoint, knocked down the work and mistreated the workers. The princes of Georgia were, in substance, satisfied with the seditions of the people, whatever they testified quite to the contrary, because having abjured the Christian religion only by mouth, and in order to have a vice-royship, they could only reluctantly give their hands to the establishment of Mohammedanism.

They have been building a small mosque in the fortress for some years, joining the wall that separates it from the main square of Tiflis. They built it in this place to accustom the people to the sight of mosques and priests, who from the top of the building call to prayer. The Georgians could not prevent the construction of the mosque, because they did not dare to enter the fortress with arms in hand, where good guard was made; but as soon as the priest went up to make the confession of faith and the customary convocation, the people gathered in the square and threw so many stones on the mosque, that the priest was forced to descend very quickly and since this mutiny there are no more brought up (Chardin, 2018:315,316; 1811: 135).

Here, it must be stressed that, according to other sources, there was at least one mosque in Tbilisi (the so-called blue mosque, or Shah Ismail mosque, built in the first quarter of the 16th century, according

to other sources, at the beginning of the 17th century). So, in this case, the information of Chardin is wrong. Perhaps he is referring to the attempt to build a minaret.

30 years after Chardin, Tournefort writes that in Tbilisi, there are two mosques in the citadel and a third, which is abandoned. (Tournefort, 1988: 70; 1982: 194).

Chardin also demonstrates the absence of Islamic influence in the daily life of Tbilisi: Every day, pig meat is sold in public and uncovered, like other meats and wine, on street corners. The Persians must have sorrowed at seeing all this. But for now, they remain powerless to remedy it. (Chardin, 2018: 316)

I want to conclude this part of the paper with another observation by Tournefort, which, in my opinion, also arouses interest: The Mohammedans have recourse to the Georgian saints, the Georgians to the Armenian saints, and sometimes the Armenians to the Mohammedan prophets. This passage allows us to infer mutual influence among the various religious and ethnic communities that coexisted in Tbilisi. (Tournefort, 1988: 69).

### **Catholic ‘Orientalism’? Activities of Catholic missionaries in Georgia**

Now, I wish to address the European perception, in particular that of Catholic missionaries, regarding Christianity in Georgia. In this regard, the study can be conducted in the frame of Edward Said’s concept of ‘Orientalism’.

The concept of Edward Said primarily concerns the Islamic East and the era of colonialism and imperialism. Among other ideas, it is stressed that the geopolitical entity called “the West” was constructed in its consciously crafted representations, in which it mirrored itself in the rest of the world. (Aluska, 2008: 140). One of the meanings of orientalism is a worldview, representation, and “style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between

‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’.” (Said, 1978: 2-3) The principal characteristic of Orientalism is a “subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arab-Islamic peoples and their culture”, which derives from Western images of what is Oriental (cultural representations) that reduce the Orient to the fictional essences of ‘Oriental peoples’ and ‘the places of the Orient’; From Said’s point of view, such cultural representations dominate the communications (discourse) of Western peoples with and about non-Western peoples.

Although I am not a fervent supporter of the theory of ‘Orientalism’ by Edward Said, I consider that its conception proves relevant in two specific contexts: firstly, to understand Europe’s attitude towards the Eastern Christian world at the beginning of the modern era, and secondly, to analyze the activities not only of England and France, but also of the Catholic Church, notably through the papal missions. Said’s perspective offers significant insight into the negative attitudes adopted by European Christian authors towards their Eastern counterparts, including Georgians.

The beginning of missionary activities was a remarkable success. The established relations with the Georgian population, aristocracy, and clergy proved to be close, and the Georgians generally showed a benevolent attitude towards the missionaries. In 1616, the missionary Paolo Maria da Faenza reported: “The Georgian ecclesiastics bear witness to a deep respect for the Roman Pontiff.” (Cit. Tamara, 1910: 495).

The Dominican father Gregorio Orsino presented on December 9, 1626, to the Propaganda Fide a report on Georgia. He writes: I believe that the propagation of the Catholic faith among the Georgians will be very easy: 1) because they are considered as a gentle, docile, simple, and excellent people; 2) because they have addressed to the

Holy Apostolic See, on several occasions, letters full of obedience, of piety, and devotion to him. (Cit. Tamarati, 1910: 496).

King of the Georgian Kingdom of Kakheti, Teimuraz, wrote to Pope Urban VIII in 1626: It's you that we are submitting to. We will do whatever you command. You're the father of all the faithful. (Cit. Tamarati, 1910: 503).

The Catholicos (Head of the Georgian Orthodox Church) gave them all the means to educate his people and to reform their religious rites. The Fathers founded a school, where children began to be taught in the Catholic faith and in belles-lettres. The people began to frequent them. Their charity, zeal, selflessness, and medical knowledge made them famous. They had soon won universal esteem and confidence.

There came a time when they began to think that it was possible the universal accession of the entire nation to the Catholic Church, but this project was not implemented because the eminence Piqué, the head of affairs in Persia, could not come to Georgia. (Cit. Tamarati, 1910: 503).

But gradually, Catholic missionaries lost their popularity, and the alienation of the local population became increasingly visible. Reasons for these changes can be considered in the frame of Said's conception. Orientalism served as a system of representations that served to consolidate the West's authority and supremacy over the East, and not just to reflect or describe it. (See Sanikidze, 2011: 107-108). The big mistake of missionaries was the Eurocentric (in this case based on Western Christianity) approach towards the Orient. Said states that the Western image of the Orient—i.e. 'Orientalism' — had little to do with the 'real' Orient. What is more important, Orientalism is not simply the work of European imagination—it is all about power, domination, hegemony, and authority. The Orient existed to

be studied, and that studying was done by Westerners who believed themselves to be superior to the "others", which is how they described the East. They were basically the opposite of the East and considered to be active, while the Orient was considered to be passive. The Orient existed to be ruled and dominated. The case of Oriental Christianity doesn't differ from the Muslim world in this sense.

For European travelers and missionaries, all Caucasian, as Middle Eastern peoples are 'others'. In general, Eastern peoples – Georgians, Turks, Abkhazs, North Caucasian tribes and others were considered as 'aliens', 'others', – therefore "barbarians" and savage. The failure of the propagation of Catholicism in large part resulted from the arrogant attitudes towards the local population. Famous Italian traveler Pietro della Valle whose knowledge about Georgia (and not only Georgia but in general of the Middle East and the Caucasus) is quite complete, prevented missionaries of the Theatin Catholic order who worked in Georgia that "each spiritual victory that you can achieve in this country significantly depends on the impression that you can create on Georgians, in particular about our religion." (Cit: Tabaghua, 1987: 133).

Don Pietro Avitabile's (who was the head of the Catholic mission in Georgia in 1626-1635) words can be considered as a vivid example of the arrogant attitude towards orthodox clerics: "I considered it a dishonor to have a benevolent attitude towards non-catholic clerics." (Avitabile, 1977: 33).

By the words of the Missionary Archangelo Lamberti "It is difficult for Patters to receive the positive results from their activities which are usual in other unbeliever countries." (Lamberti, 1936: 33). (Unbeliever country – typical assessment for catholic missionaries about eastern Christians).

For showing the real nature of the Catholic missions, it is worth examining the letters of the Head of the Catholic Mission in Western Georgia, Giuseppe Zampi. His letters are included in the Famous “Travels to Persia and other places of the Orient” of Jean Chardin. Zampi wrote about the religious practices of the Mengrelians (a Georgian sub-ethnic group) and harshly condemns these practices as “non-Christian”.

It is evident from the work of Zampi that he worked hard for the propagation of Catholicism, and he succeeded in promoting some catholic religious rites but not in the conversion of the local population. At the beginning, he stresses that “we must take care of these poor people and overcome all the obstacles that prevent these people from becoming worthy participants in the Lord’s grace” and “We are in Georgia to pray for these poor people to God.” (Chardin, 2018: 212). But in reality, these ‘poor people’ are alien to the catholic missionary and his failure in propagation of the “true” faith is explained by the savagery of Georgians.

Zampi’s work stands out with certain tendentiousness. The author sees all things from the clerical point of view. Anything that's not part of the Catholic faith is dangerous for the spiritual life of people. By defending such a point of view, he justifies his mission in Georgia, and on the other hand, he pledges to the Propaganda Fide on the necessity of the propagation of Catholicism in Georgia. From my point of view, Zampi’s work can be considered an illustrative example of the ‘Catholic Orientalism’. It can be said that anything which doesn’t correspond to catholic dogmas is wrong and vicious, consequently non-Christian.

His goal isn’t the impartial, unprejudiced description of the religiosity of Western Georgians but the condemnation of their reli-

gious practices from catholic positions – so he writes again and again in accordance with the pre-determined scheme.

Catholic missionaries perceived and evaluated Christianity in Georgia from their religious positions and concluded that the general principles of the religion are perverted and misrepresented. Zampi is especially overzealous in this sense which is logical because he tries to justify his mission and to demonstrate his achievement in the ‘purification’ of the Christianity in Georgia. He stresses that sacred ceremonies, prayer, religious feasts, Holy orders, Baptism, Communion, and other religious rites are executed in the wrong way, and it’s the violations of Christian (i.e., Catholic) dogmas.

Zampi adds: It’s a futile attempt to search for righteousness in Christianity among these people. There is only its aspersions and remaining covered by superstition.

Zampi speaks about the widespread practice of Simony (the act of selling church offices and roles). He writes that the Head of the Georgian Church Catholicos receives 500 ecu for appointment from bishops and 100 ecu and more for mass and funeral service. But he didn’t mention that this practice was also widespread in the European catholic world. Prelates also didn’t fulfill their religious duty if they hadn’t received money. (Chardin, 2018: 213).

If they commit something infamous and consider it a sin, they try to atone by offerings to the icons or paying money to the church. They asked their prelates to give them an official written document of the absolution. The absolution is quite expensive, so only rich people can afford it. Here again, Zampi didn’t mention the widespread practice of selling indulgences in Catholic Europe. By his words, Eastern Christians, because of their false religious beliefs, included the unction in the sacred rites. Their patriarchs sold the holy oil to the priests and received great benefit.

For Zampi, this deviation of Georgians from the true faith is a result of the influence of Greek 'false Christianity', of Judaism, and even Paganism. He writes: Their veneration of icons is such that you can consider that they are the most devoted Christians in the world, but it is clear that their religiosity is closer to Judaism and Paganism than to Christianity. They prayed without devotion and respect. Zampi adds: Mengrelians maintained the true faith for many years when were alive who propagated the religion among them. But after they mixed their rites with Jewish and other traditions, and like the Greeks, abandoned the Holy Roman-Catholic church. No one knows what the faith is, the religion, and most of them think that the afterlife is a fable, fabricated by men.

They make the sign of the cross in the Greek style, and so they confirm their heresy. Few of them know that the sign of the cross is the symbol of Christianity. They think that this sign means permission to eat pork. (Chardin, 2018: 186). Here, I think, Zampi has shown his absolute contempt towards hypothetical converts, and it's not a big surprise that he has not succeeded in his work.

Missionaries in general stress: We learned that none of the Georgians are baptized, or that their baptism is inadequate. They are proud that they succeeded in baptizing many people who were baptized by ignorant priests and improperly performed rites, and as a result, baptism could be considered ineffective. They taught the clergy the right prayers. But in reality, there was no reason for such bragging.

Zampi, on the basis of his request, was appointed as the head of Mission in Western Georgia for the second term. In this regard it is worth to mention his words to Jean Chardin: "God will forgive the person who advised you to come to this country and brings you such misfortune. You've arrived in the most terrible and barbarian cou-

ntry!” (Chardin, 2018: 212). If this was the most terrible and barbarian country which he detested, why did he ask to appoint him for the second term in Georgia?

The case of Chardin is also interesting. He was sent to Persia to establish close contacts with the Safavid court. This was the epoch when European countries competed with each other for the hegemony in the East. Chardin chose the transit route via Georgia for his second travel in Persia. Chardin himself, as a protestant, has no perspective on career progression because the French government has a lack of trust in persons who have abandoned the catholic faith. He wrote: “When I returned to France, I discovered that because of my faith I wasn’t provided with employment opportunities. It was necessary to change the profession or to renounce all what that is called respect and fame. You haven’t the right to profess your faith freely.” (Chardin, 2018: 212). Finally, he immigrated to London and became the ambassador of His Majesty in Holland.

Speaking about the religious tolerance in Persia, Chardin stressed that Protestants in Persia were allowed to profess their faith without restriction. In general, in the Islamic world of this epoch, authorities hadn’t prevented proselytism among their Christian subjects. European missionaries tried to convert Eastern Christians to their Faith (for example, Orthodox to Catholicism – the case of Georgia). It must be added that in this sense, the Muslim East was much more tolerant than Christian Europe. But it was strictly prohibited to proselytize among Muslims. At the same time, many Eastern Christians (especially nobility) converted to Islam for economic and political reasons.

Chardin considers that the main obstacle to the propagation of Catholicism in Georgia is the long-running rivalry between Greeks on the basis of religious discord.

Chardin stresses that he had no conversation with the Mingrelians (a sub-ethnic group in Western Georgia) about religion because he couldn't find any person who knew something about the faith, God's law, Sin, communion, and worship. But Chardin himself wrote in other places that he met several priests and discussed with them religious issues.

Another obstacle to the propagation of the Catholic faith was the negative attitude of tradesmen. Merchants and artisans in the towns were unhappy with the activities of the political agents of Western Europe, the Catholic missionaries. They became strong rivals, and conflict between them was inevitable.

### **Conclusion**

From the Iranian point of view, Eastern Georgia was a part of the Safavid state (not fully integrated), governed by an Islamized member of the Georgian royal family, appointed by the shah and supervised by Iranian officials. The aim of the Safavid rulers was to guarantee the loyalty of the appointed king (vali), and that of the Georgian feudal elite was to receive regular income. The first steps during the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth century towards the total Islamization of Eastern Georgia, its full integration in the Safavid realm, and the total substitution of the Georgian institutions by Iranian analogues, from the late 1620s, were abandoned and replaced by the so-called 'politics of compromise'. The Georgians were also satisfied with this situation, which provided various opportunities both within Georgia and in Iran, but the Georgian kings sought every favorable opportunity to gain greater independence from the Safavid court.

Regarding the activities of the Catholic missions, it is worth noting that their primary objective was to establish stronger political, economic, and cultural ties between Georgia and Western Europe.

But the attempt to propagate the Western European version of Christianity has practically no positive results, and by the end of the 17th century, the activities of Catholic missions in Georgia were ended. The main reason for the failure of this endeavor was the lack of understanding of the ‘real’ Orient by the Catholic missions, which can be discussed within the framework of Said’s concept of ‘Orientalism’.

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