



# International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science

e-ISSN: 2544-9435

Scholarly Publisher  
RS Global Sp. z O.O.  
ISNI: 0000 0004 8495 2390

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## ARTICLE TITLE

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POLITICS: PERSPECTIVES FROM GEORGIA

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## ARTICLE INFO

Giorgi Pareshishvili. (2025) The Role of Christianity and Islam in Global Peace  
Politics: Perspectives From Georgia. *International Journal of Innovative  
Technologies in Social Science*. 1(45). doi: 10.31435/ijitss.1(45).2025.3203

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## DOI

[https://doi.org/10.31435/ijitss.1\(45\).2025.3203](https://doi.org/10.31435/ijitss.1(45).2025.3203)

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## RECEIVED

25 January 2025

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## ACCEPTED

18 March 2025

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## PUBLISHED

28 March 2025

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# THE ROLE OF CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM IN GLOBAL PEACE POLITICS: PERSPECTIVES FROM GEORGIA

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the complex interplay between Christianity and Islam in global peace politics through the unique lens of Georgia, a country situated at the crossroads of Eastern Europe and Western Asia. Drawing from historical analysis, contemporary political discourse, and religious studies, this research explores how these two major world religions influence international peace-building efforts, with particular attention to Georgia's distinctive position as a predominantly Orthodox Christian nation with significant historical and contemporary connections to Islamic cultures. The study investigates the potential for interfaith dialogue and cooperation in promoting global peace while acknowledging the challenges and opportunities presented by Georgia's geopolitical context.

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## KEYWORDS

Interfaith Dialogue, Peace Politics, Georgia, Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Religious Diplomacy, Conflict Resolution

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## CITATION

Giorgi Pareshishvili. (2025) The Role of Christianity and Islam in Global Peace Politics: Perspectives From Georgia. *International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science*. 1(45). doi: 10.31435/ijitss.1(45).2025.3203

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The intersection of religion and international politics has become increasingly significant in the contemporary global landscape, particularly in regions where different religious traditions converge. Georgia, with its rich religious heritage and strategic location between Europe and Asia, offers a unique perspective on the role of Christianity and Islam in shaping peace politics. This research examines how religious institutions, beliefs, and practices influence peace-building initiatives and international relations through the distinctive prism of Georgian experience and scholarship.

The relationship between Christianity and Islam in Georgia dates back to the 7th century, making it an ideal case study for understanding long-term patterns of religious coexistence and conflict resolution. As a country that has maintained its Christian identity while developing sophisticated mechanisms for interfaith cooperation, Georgia's experience offers valuable insights into the potential for religious dialogue in promoting global peace.

Contemporary peace studies increasingly recognize the importance of religious actors in conflict resolution and peace-building. This paper employs a multidimensional framework that considers:

- The role of religious institutions as mediators in international conflicts
- The influence of religious values on peace-building initiatives
- The impact of interfaith dialogue on cross-cultural understanding
- The relationship between religious identity and national security

## Christianity in Georgia<sup>1</sup>

The Foundations of Georgian Christianity

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1. Rapp, Stephen H. Jr. *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes: Caucasia and the Iranian Commonwealth in Late Antique Georgian Literature*. London: Routledge, 2016.

Georgia's embrace of Christianity in the fourth century CE stands as a pivotal moment that has fundamentally shaped both its national character and diplomatic relationships.<sup>1</sup> Within this framework, the Georgian Orthodox Church has fulfilled a unique dual mandate, functioning not only as a religious authority but also as a steadfast protector of Georgian cultural heritage.<sup>2</sup> This role proved particularly crucial during periods when foreign powers held sway over the region, as the Church maintained cultural continuity and national identity.<sup>43</sup>

### Islamic Influence and Religious Coexistence

The seventh-century arrival of Islam through Arab conquests marked the beginning of an intricate period of religious interaction in Georgia.<sup>4</sup> The nation's response to this religious plurality, particularly during its Golden Age from the eleventh through thirteenth centuries, demonstrated remarkable sophistication in managing interfaith relations.<sup>6</sup> These historical experiences continue to inform Georgia's contemporary approaches to religious dialogue and peace-building initiatives.<sup>76</sup>

While writing this article, I had the opportunity to conduct in-depth interviews with several authoritative figures who expressed the following views:

The text appears to be a compilation of perspectives from various religious leaders and officials regarding the relationship between Christianity, Islam, and global politics. The interviewees include:

- His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew
- Bishop Kirakos Davtyan of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church's Georgian Diocese
- Metropolitan Grigol of Poti and Khobi
- Sheikh Faig Nabiev of the Muslim Administration of All Georgia
- Ambassador Jos Douma, the Netherlands' Special Representative for Religion and Belief
- Archpriest Levan Mateshvili
- Mufti Adam Shantadze of the Muslim Administration of All Georgia

Each of these figures provided their expert analysis on the influence of Christianity and Islam on world political processes, interfaith dialogue, and the potential for religious cooperation in peacebuilding efforts. Their perspectives range from optimistic views about interfaith cooperation to more cautionary stances about the separation of religion and politics.

**His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew** notes that there are certain differences between Christian and Muslim influence in relation to politics. In his opinion, both Christianity and Islam have deeply influenced the political reality of societies where they are recognized, though the nature and scale of their influence differs significantly due to theological, historical, and cultural differences.

According to the Ecumenical Patriarch, "In modern times, the relationship between religion and politics varies significantly across different countries and cultures. In some nations, religion continues to play a central role in political life, while in others, secularism is firmly established as a guiding principle. There are both positive and negative reasons for considering religion in politics. The positive includes moral guidance and the importance of representing believers, as well as social unity. Arguments for limiting religion in politics include religious freedom and avoiding religious conflict or discrimination, as well as focusing on common ground or common good. It's important to maintain balance in both arguments or beliefs, which includes pluralism and dialogue, tolerance and respect, as well as personal dignity and legal protection."

The Ecumenical Patriarch believes that both religions respect and promote interfaith dialogue, through which they can contribute to world peace, tolerance, and cooperation. He states that it was on this basis that the Ecumenical Patriarchate created many interfaith initiatives, programs, and declarations to engage in constructive conversations and break down barriers of superstition and misunderstanding, while collaborating

2. Rayfield, Donald. *Edge of Empires: A History of Georgia*. London: Reaktion Books, 2012.

3. Grdzeldze, Tamara. *Georgian Monks on Mount Athos: Two Eleventh-Century Lives of the Hegoumenoi of Iviron*. London: Bennett & Bloom, 2009.

4. Suny, Ronald Grigor. *The Making of the Georgian Nation*. 2nd ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.

5. Sanadze, Manana. "History of Georgian Church: Period of Arabs' Domination (7th-9th Centuries)." *Journal of Religious History* 38, no. 2 (2014): 245-259

6. Eastmond, Antony. *Royal Imagery in Medieval Georgia*. University Park: Penn State University Press, 1998.

7. Pelkmans, Mathijs. *Defending the Border: Identity, Religion, and Modernity in the Republic of Georgia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006.

to achieve common goals and mutual understanding. His All-Holiness believes that religions can work together to alleviate poverty, improve healthcare, and reduce conflicts. They can also promote peaceful coexistence and condemn violence, while supporting human dignity and advancing more moderate voices.

**Bishop Kirakos Davtyan, head of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church's Georgian Diocese,** believes that Islam and Christianity have significant and multifaceted roles in world political processes. In the Bishop's opinion, both religions influence political, social, and cultural aspects in different regions and often participate in global events.

Bishop Kirakos Davtyan provided specific examples: "In some Islamic countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, Sharia (Islamic law) is the foundation for political and legal systems. These countries base their governance and political processes on religious doctrines. In Muslim countries, there are political movements and parties that operate based on Islamic principles. These movements often try to Islamize the country's politics and society. For example, the 'Muslim Brotherhood' in Egypt and ' Hamas' in Palestine played significant roles. In Europe, there are Christian Democratic parties that primarily operate on the basis of Christian ethics and social doctrine. These parties play important roles in shaping European political systems. In the USA, Christian values significantly influence politics. Conservative political forces often use Christian doctrines in issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and education. The Roman Catholic Church and Vatican are important global players. The Pope often expresses positions. Serbian Orthodox, Croatian Catholics, and Bosnian Muslims were involved in conflict with each other."

The Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church leader believes that Islam and Christianity play important roles in world political processes, with each of their influences occurring in different forms and intensities - both religions participate not only in internal state politics but also in global issues, which affects international relations, security, and social development.

**Metropolitan Grigol of Poti and Khobi** believes regarding peace politics that Christianity and Islam cannot cooperate - rather, people who are bearers of Christian and Islamic faiths should cooperate. In his opinion, this issue should be considered at a concrete level, much depends on individuals, their personal qualities, sincerity of attitudes, and reliability of their word. Additionally, the Metropolitan touches on historical context, where this confrontation was always present, going back to the biblical story when conflict began between brothers, Sarah's children, Hagar's children, and their descendants, from where these roots come from and effectively continues, and we will necessarily encounter the trace of religion, the roots of religion, everywhere and always.

**Sheikh Faig Nabiev of the Muslim Administration** of All Georgia believes regarding peace politics: "All heavenly [religions] call for human aspiration towards peace and harmony, it was always against bloodshed and wars. This is clearly seen through the lives of divine mediators-prophets. As noted in the Bible of Matthew, St. Jesus told the apostle who cut off the ear of one of those who came to arrest him with a sword: 'Do not draw your sword, for whoever draws the sword will die by the sword.' Many similar events are found in Islamic sources. Just as the Islamic mediator-prophet did not kill even his worst enemies after conquering Mecca, he replied to those who said 'Today is the day of revenge,' 'Today is not the day of revenge, but today is the day of mercy and goodness.' All such examples demonstrate that both Christianity and Islam have contributed significantly to establishing peace and stability in the world."

**According to Ambassador Jos Douma, the Netherlands' Special Representative for Religion and Belief,** Christianity and Islam are the largest religions and by nature, due to their influence on concepts and rights definitions, they influence global political processes. However, he also notes that caution is needed, as rulers often present themselves as faithful, believing followers of religion, but in reality want to present themselves as such for political reasons. He cites as examples: Ivanishvili in Georgia, Orban in Hungary, Putin in Russia, and Trump in the United States.

Regarding peace politics, Ambassador Jos Douma cites historical facts: "Both religions are very influential, even when voters, people, and rulers are no longer Christians or Muslims, or refrain from identifying as such. They have inherited concepts and traditions, think in these terms and/or use them (sometimes as pretexts).

As a general answer to your questions, I must draw attention to the conceptualization of the United Nations Charter and the definition of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Western Christians took the

initiative and composed texts together with then few Muslim leaders and with very little critical guidance from Communist leaders. Now the world has changed, as have political concepts and practices, but old doctrines are still incorporated in the texts from the fifties. One example: why was the state of Israel created?"

**Archpriest Levan Mateshvili believes that Islam** is just as much an instrument in politics as Christianity. In his opinion, Islam's effectiveness in this direction is much greater than Christianity's, because active followers in Islam have great influence both in ethnic states and in migration politics. He believes that Christianity's influence on politics is minimized against the background of mass secularization of the population. Regarding peace politics, he sees no positive role, as both Islam and especially Christianity are fragmented and in conflict with themselves. He believes that in the current situation, these religions can have no influence in the cause of world peace and the cause of peace is not dependent on them.

**Mufti Adam Shantadze of the Muslim Administration** of All Georgia believes that Islam and Christianity, as the world's two main leading religions, have a huge influence on world political processes. However, he thinks that politics and religion should be separated from each other - neither should politics interfere in religion nor religion in politics. He notes that when religion determines political life, various problems are inadvertently created, meaning the dominant religion takes everything in its favor, while others fall into a discriminated state. For the Mufti, it is important that a state official should be religious, a follower of one religion, but should treat all citizens of the country equally and fairly, regardless of ethnic and confessional affiliation.

According to Mufti Adam Shantadze of the Muslim Administration: "Islam and Christianity are the two leading religions in the world, which are also dogmatically close to each other. The main principle of both is recognition of monotheism, faith, and doing good. Accordingly, their role is immeasurable in establishing and strengthening world peace. The greatest responsibility lies with clergy, behind whom stand millions of followers. It is precisely the relationship, behaviors, and religious tolerance of clergy that forms the foundation for peaceful coexistence."

The diverse perspectives offered by these prominent religious and diplomatic figures reveal several crucial insights about the relationship between Islam, Christianity, and global political processes. While there is a consensus that both religions exert significant influence on world politics, their views diverge on the nature and desirability of this influence.

### **Conclusions**

Three main themes emerge from these interviews:

First, there is a fundamental tension between religion's role as a force for peace and its potential for political instrumentalization. As Ambassador Douma pointedly observes, political leaders often appropriate religious identity for political gain, while Patriarch Bartholomew emphasizes religion's potential for promoting moral guidance and social unity.

Second, the interviews reveal contrasting views on religious cooperation in peacebuilding. While some leaders, like Patriarch Bartholomew and Mufti Shantadze, emphasize the potential for interfaith dialogue and cooperation in addressing global challenges, others, like Metropolitan Grigol and Archpriest Mateshvili, express skepticism about institutional religious cooperation, suggesting that meaningful interaction must occur at the individual level.

Third, there is significant debate about the proper relationship between religion and state. Mufti Shantadze advocates for clear separation between religious and political spheres to prevent discrimination, while Bishop Davtyan's examples illustrate how deeply intertwined religion and politics remain in many contexts, from Islamic states to European Christian Democratic parties.

These findings suggest that while religion continues to be a powerful force in global politics, its role is complex and contested. The challenge for the future appears to lie in harnessing religion's potential for promoting peace and social good while guarding against its exploitation for political purposes. This requires careful attention to both institutional structures and individual relationships, as well as a nuanced understanding of how religious and political spheres interact in different cultural contexts.

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