

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324311535>

Evangelical Christian Baptists of Georgia: The History and Transformation of a Free Church Tradition

Article in *Theological Reflections Euro-Asian Journal of Theology* · June 2017

DOI: 10.29357/issn.2521-179X.2017.18.171

CITATIONS

0

READS

109

1 author:



[Oleksandr Geychenko](#)

University of St Andrews

5 PUBLICATIONS 0 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

*EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN BAPTISTS OF GEORGIA: THE HISTORY AND TRANSFORMATION OF A FREE CHURCH TRADITION. STUDIES IN WORLD CHRISTIANITY, VOL. 3. BY MALKHAZ SONGULASHVILI. WACO, TX: BAYLOR UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2015. XXVIII + 508 PP.; ISBN 9781481301107 (HBK.); 79.95 USD.**

Another valuable contribution to the field of regional Baptist history has been published recently. This book is by Dr. Malkhaz Songulashvili, the former archbishop of the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia (EBC) and now diocesan bishop of Tbilisi, a translator of the Bible into modern Georgian and a lecturer at Ilia State University and Baptist Theological Academy. The book is based on his PhD thesis presented to the faculty of the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies (OCMS) in 2012.

The author describes the unique missiological experience of the EBC which resulted in a combination of Baptist heritage and traditionally Orthodox elements of “liturgy,” “anaphora,” “bishops,” etc., embodied in EBC practices. He explores “the history and character of *Georgian* EBC congregations and their mission, as distinct from treating Baptists in Georgia simply as one branch of the former Soviet All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists” (2). To accomplish this task, the author analyses “historical, theological and pastoral trajectories that contributed to the unique missiological convictions of EBC” (2). First, he traces the historical progression in the life of the EBC that brought together unique historical, social, and ecclesial factors. History and the historical analysis of surviving documents make up one of the central nerves of the study. Second, the author analyses the interaction of mission, culture, and church in the practices and convictions of the EBC and the way these have produced “an understanding of the particular character of EBC mission in theory and practice” (2).

The book consists of a preface, an introduction, five chapters, a conclusion, and appendices representing original documents. The author consistently applies this approach in the first four chapters, narrating the EBC story which culminates in a description in chapter five of the preconditions, nature, and unfolding of the reforms that took place from the late 1990s to the early 2000s.

Chapter one describes the historical setting of spiritual renewal among Molokans, the emergence of Russian Baptists in Tiflis, and the subsequent conversion of Georgians. It depicts a unique portrait of the Tiflis community, singling out its practices of evangelism among Russians (61-63), sacramentalism (64-69), its ecclesiological model with a threefold ministry and “patriarchate” type church, and its mission to Georgians (78-81). The author finds traces of sacramentalism in the description of

* The review received on 22.03.2017; approved for publication on 10.04.2017.

the Lord's Supper by Orthodox priest Nikolai Kallistov (353-354), which, opines Songulashvili, "from the perspective of the Orthodox priest ... contained all the necessary elements of the Eucharistic anaphora" (64). The ecclesiological model presented in another document (361-366) contains the earliest contextual proposal for organising structure, order, and practices of the Baptist church in Transcaucasia. Songulashvili claims that sacramentalism and the aforesaid ecclesiological model testify that the Tiflis community tried to merge Western and Eastern traditions and this becomes a very important claim for his argument.

Chapter two traces the origins and early history of the Georgian Baptists (1919-1941), paying attention to the views, life, and death of Ilia Kandellaki, founding father of the EBC. Kandellaki appreciated Georgian culture (110-117) and blamed the imperial politics of russification for the demise of Georgian Christian culture. He also aspired to revive Georgian spirituality and culture via a new Bible translation (117-123, 143-149). The concept of the revival of a "once beautiful" faith, which involves national identity, culture, and local art forms, is one of the key concepts for Songulashvili.

Chapter three explores the period after WWII (1942-1989). It focuses on church-state relations, the adaptation of the EBC's mission during a time of reigning atheism, and aspirations for and anticipation of freedom in the late 1980s. The unique feature of this period was a dialogue between some Orthodox and Baptist ministers. Here again is seen an attempt to build bridges with traditional Christian culture through Baptist-Orthodox dialogue. The dialogue focuses on such issues as sacraments (211-215), icons (215-216), national life, and religion (216-218).

Chapter four describes the evangelism activity of the EBC in post-Soviet Georgia. The context of rising religious nationalism, civil wars and unrest, and the war with Russia determined the nature of the EBC's mission and radical reforms during this period. The new nationalism put an end to positive Baptist-Orthodox relations and necessitated uneasy discussions on such sensitive issues for the Orthodox Church as territoriality (canonical territory), patronage of the *Theotokos*, the cult of antiquity, and especially proselytism. In the new situation the EBC's practice of evangelism has changed in that it emphasises (a) change without pushing one into membership; (b) conversion to faith, not to the Baptist denomination; (c) *theosis* as the aim of spiritual growth; and (d) renewal of the spiritual, liturgical, and intellectual life of the community and the wider society.

Perhaps the most intriguing is chapter five, which explains the preconditions, nature, and unfolding of the reforms. The political independence of Georgia, the autocephaly of the EBC, appreciation for Georgian culture, and dialogue with the Orthodox Church are the key factors influencing the reforms. The involvement of Georgian Baptists in relief work among Chechen refugees and their political engagement during the Rose Revolution raised awareness among Baptists of the wider society and its needs, concerns, and aspirations. With the support of the leadership a group of younger Baptists began investigating the way Baptists should accomplish God's mission in the context of the new Georgia. This resulted in greater involvement

in the social and public life of Georgia and the renewal of liturgy. The latter incorporated such unusual worship forms for Baptists as a lectionary, vestments, processions, and a liturgical calendar, as well as the widespread use of icons, crosses, and other forms of art in worship.

The conclusion summarises the results of the reforms under the general topics of culture and mission, liturgy and beauty, church and culture.

In many ways this is a brilliant book. The author masterfully weaves together social, political, and cultural contexts and demonstrates how they challenged and influenced the EBC. He tells a vivid story of how the Baptists in Georgia trod their way between local Georgian and imperial Russian/Soviet culture, between their Baptist confessional identity and wider Christian tradition.

The study uses unique archival documents in Georgian, Russian, and English, some of which are being introduced to the scholarly community for the first time. The author brings in a very erudite analysis of the texts and contexts against which the EBC developed and puts all these in dialogue with recent scholarship.

However, at some points his attempts to interpret some Baptist practices as having affinity with Orthodox practices are not very compelling. Although Kallistov's description of the Lord's Supper resembles Orthodox practice in some respects, the observer himself denies any sacramental understanding of baptism or communion by Baptists (352-354). Kallistov's interpretation of these practices is in sharp contrast with Songulashvili's. Another example is the attempt to explain wall inscriptions by appealing to the Orthodox practice of using icons and visual art (140). While Russian and Soviet Baptists' reverence for the Scriptures is well known and the proposed iconic reading could have some validity, it also should be noted that using placards and banners was a widespread practice in Soviet Russia as well. The use of Scripture banners could well be a mere imitation of contemporary pop-art forms.

Songulashvili's supposition of unknown authorship and a late date (1890) of the early proposal on the reorganisation of Baptist churches is mistaken (71-72). Both Aleksii in *Vnutrenniaia organizatsiia obshchin iuzhno-russkikh neo-baptistov* [The internal organization of communities of South Russian neo-Baptists], p. 9; and Valkevich in *Zapiska o propagande protestantskikh sekt* [A memorandum on the propaganda of Protestant sects], app. II, p. 12, ascribe it to Vasilii V. Ivanov. Valkevich says the document was confiscated during a search on 7 June 1884 but actually dates it before 1879. Indeed, after V. G. Pavlov was elected and ordained presbyter in 1880, the Tiflis Baptist church completely moved to a German Baptist model. Therefore, the text represents an earlier tradition that never was realised. Why? Scholars still need to answer these questions.

The liturgical and enculturation reforms attempted by the EBC look interesting and are, in some respects, attractive. Needless to say, not all Baptists were happy with such radical changes and this eventually grew into a serious confrontation between the proponents and opponents of the reforms. Indeed, to what extent may the introduction of a threefold order of ministers (deacons, ministers, and

bishops) affect traditional Baptist ecclesiology? And what specifically Baptist is left except the blessing of children at the worship service (304)? These questions are left unanswered.

Yet, notwithstanding these minor shortcomings, I earnestly recommend the book to anyone interested in Baptist history and theology.

*Oleksandr Geychenko
University of St Andrews
St Andrews, UK*



Еще одна важная публикация из области региональной истории баптистов вышла из печати. Это книга доктора Малхаза Сонгулашвили, бывшего архиепископа Евангельской баптистской церкви Грузии (ЕБЦ), ныне епископа Тбилиси, переводчика Библии на современный грузинский и преподавателя в государственном университете им. Св. Илии и Баптистской теологической академии. Книга основана на диссертации, защищенной в Оксфордском центре миссионерских исследований в 2012 году.

Автор описывает уникальный миссиологический опыт ЕБЦ, реализованный в соединении баптистского наследия и традиционных православных элементов “литургии”, “анафоры”, “епископата” и пр., и воплощенный в практиках ЕБЦ. Он исследует “историю и природу грузинских общин ЕБЦ, и их миссии, как такой, которая отличается от рассматриваемых баптистов Грузии как часть бывшего советского ВСЕХБ” (2). С этой целью автор анализирует “исторические, теологические и пасторские траектории, внесшие вклад в уникальные миссиологические убеждения ЕБЦ” (2). Он, во-первых, демонстрирует историческое развитие жизни ЕБЦ, соединившее уникальные исторические, социальные и церковные факторы. История и исторический анализ сохранившихся документов становится одним из центральных нервов исследования. Во-вторых, автор анализирует взаимодействие миссии, культуры и церкви, отразившееся в практиках и убеждениях ЕБЦ, а также то, как это привело к “пониманию определенного характера миссии ЕБЦ в теории и практике” (2).

Книга состоит из предисловия, введения, пяти глав, заключения и приложений, содержащих английский перевод оригинальных документов. Автор последовательно применяет свой подход, описывая в первых четырех главах историю ЕБЦ с конца XIX по начало XXI века, повествование достигает кульминации в пятой главе, где анализируются предпосылки, природа и ход реформ, выпавших на конец 1990-х — начало 2000-х годов.

Первая глава описывает исторический контекст духовного пробуждения среди молокан на Кавказе, зарождение русской баптистской церкви в Тифлисе и последующее обращение грузин. В ней изображен уникальный портрет Тифлисской общины, где выделяются практики благовестия среди русских (61-63), сакраментализм (64-69), эклезиологическая модель с тремя степенями священства и структурой “патриархата” (69-78), а также миссия среди грузин