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Review of Songulashvili's "Evangelical Christian Baptists of Georgia: The History and Transformation of a Free Church Tradition"

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BOOK REVIEWS

Malkhaz Songulashvili, *Evangelical Christian Baptists of Georgia: The History and Transformation of a Free Church Tradition*. Waco TX: Baylor University Press, 2015. 536 pp., 17 appendices, bibliography, index, ISBN 978-1-4813-0110-7.

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This big book may seem esoteric at first glance, merely for those interested in Georgian minority religion, yet it is part of the larger series "Studies in World Christianity," edited by Joel Carpenter of Calvin College. It may make it more relevant to readers to think of Songulashvili's book on "the transformation of a free church tradition" in comparison with other recent books about evangelicals in the former Soviet Union, written by new scholars from the region. These latest studies differ from earlier works, including this reviewer's, because of much greater access to official state and private archives, even if generally confirming earlier understandings of the patterns that the communist theory driven war on religion took over 70 years. Recent studies are much more focused on showing the cultural differences between the regions and the center, to put it simply. Yet this book, in contrast to Puzynin's *Gospel Christians*,[1] or Toivo Pilli's *Dance or Die*,[2] is above all a study of what happens when a free church tradition, such as the Baptists, which everyone thinks they know, seeks to take seriously its cultural uniqueness while also taking on Georgianness and its 1600-year Christian history, no less.

It was long in preparation, and the post-Soviet story, which is included, has its own sad elements of incomprehension by fellow Baptists. The dominant story in the literature has the Evangelical Christians and Baptists emerging out of the impact of the translation of the New

[1]Andrei P. Puzynin, *The Tradition of the Gospel Christians: A Study of Their Identity and Theology during the Russian, Soviet, and Post-Soviet Periods.* OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011.

[2] Toivo Pilli, *Dance or Die: The Shaping of Estonian Baptist Identity under Communism*, Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2008.

Testament (1821), then the whole Bible (1876) into modern Russian. In many places, the new Russian Bible Society (1813) used it as a tool for teaching literacy. So it was an indigenous free church Bible movement, at the same time influenced by western free churches such as the Baptists, Mennonites, later also Pentecostals. There were three places of origin: St. Petersburg among the elite and peasants, through preaching by British Open Brethren; Stundism in southern Ukraine, where peasants had observed Bible studies among Mennonite, Lutheran and Reformed German colonies, who were forbidden to proselytize; and in Tbilisi, Georgia, where the first adult baptism (1867) is claimed as a starting point for the movement as a whole. Acquired by conquest in the late 18th century, Georgia became multi-ethnic, a place of exile. Its Georgian Orthodox Church was restructured, headed by a rather progressive Russian Orthodox Exarch, named Feofilakt, who was already involved with the new Russian Bible Society, and was a teacher in the new (1814) theological academies that made possible the Bible translation project.

Striking in this story is that the Scriptures, available to the Georgian Orthodox from around the 6th century, did not get translated into modern Georgian until 1989. My first encounter with author Malkhaz Songulashvili was in January of 1988, when 5,000 sets of the newly completed Russian translation of the William Barclay Study Bible, plus 100,000 Russian Bibles (via the United Bible Societies (UBS)) were officially imported. *Perestroika* had finally opened up to religion. To celebrate, we met at the Moscow headquarters of the Evangelical Christian Baptists Union, where its general secretary, Alexei Bychkov, proudly announced we were going to have a day of Bible study, where younger Soviet scholars would contribute. A 25-year old Malkhaz Songulashvili was introduced as having the year before received the Georgian equivalent of a PhD in Semitic linguistics, (the state university having permitted a Jewish scholar to teach). Further, Songulashvili had just been invited to join the translation committee

established by the Georgian Orthodox church to produce a new translation in cooperation with the United Bible Societies.

Songulashvili's eleven page preface offers fascinating autobiographical detail. Even though the general impression in the Baptist world was that Georgian Baptists worshipped in Russian and only a small contingent met to worship in Georgian, the preface reports that as early as the 1960s, three Georgian Baptist leaders were already exploring dialogue with the Georgian Orthodox Church (both bodies suffering under Khrushchev's aggressive campaign against religion). In addition to Malkhaz's father as pastor, his grandmother and sister also furthered the legacy of dialogue a generation later, until together with new leader Malkhaz Songulashvili (1994f) they began reforms in liturgy, vestments, and above all seeking to recover the social service ministries, involuntarily abandoned under Khrushchev. By the 1990s, the Russian-Chechen war had resulted in many refugees fleeing to Georgia. Such involvement, he stated, "changed my life" (pxxii), "I was converted to true Christian faith ... by encountering Chechen Muslims" (pxxii), even though Malkhaz was already a bishop. By this he meant that his church "learned how to serve its enemies," then that social service experience resulted in "opening up the ordained ministry to women", and so on.

At that point, the majority of national Baptist bodies in the territory of the former Soviet Union signed a letter expelling the Georgian Baptists from the Euro-Asiatic Baptist Federation. For Songulashvili, the ministry to "enemies" also resulted in his response during the trial and sentencing of an Orthodox archpriest (Basil Mkalavishvili) who had attacked Baptists and burned churches, offering him forgiveness and reconciliation, asking the court for leniency. A few years later Songulashvili and the archpriest, now as friends, came to the Orange Revolution in Kiev to show solidarity and assist demonstrators in learning non-violent ways. Then came

more encounters with Islamophobia and homophobia. Following violence against a Muslim community in Georgia (2013), Songulashvili protested publicly and joined demonstrations of solidarity. That social-political solidarity led to his travel to numerous Middle Eastern Muslim countries on behalf of peace-building efforts. At the same time, the Georgian public and Georgian Orthodox encouraged acts of physical abuse and discrimination against LGBT persons. Songulashvili attempted to get his own Baptist synod to permit the sacraments of baptism and marriage to other than heterosexual persons. His synod found such breadth of commitment to human rights too difficult, so Songulashvili resigned as archbishop, retaining his role as bishop of Tbilisi. Soon after, he was invited to teach comparative theology (Christian-Jewish-Muslim) in the state university.

This story keeps surprising. In a rather open and humble style, Songulashvili describes how he and fellow leaders discovered to what contextualizing the gospel calls serious Christians, and what it can cost. Above all, this book presents a probing evangelical Protestant missiology that demands serious reading by western Catholic, Orthodox, and Evangelical missiologists. His method of story-telling is two-fold: chapters three through five tell the story of the way these Georgian "Evangelical Christian Baptists" (ECBs) found their way into embracing Georgianness; secondly, in a surprisingly short conclusion, followed by 17 appendices of documents in English translation, comes a simply stated missiology of enculturation based on three pillars: social ministry, liturgy (worship) and beauty (aesthetics). All three are seldom central in prevailing missiological writing in the west or 'global south:' so it is worth discovering.

The third chapter begins with a political change that reframed the "institutional identity" of religious bodies. With the Nazi army overrunning large parts of western USSR in late 1942,

Stalin changed course to permit limited religious practice through centrally controlled Orthodox and Protestant bodies in Moscow. The subsequent shift toward a renewed anti-religious pressure (1960-76) forced Georgian Christians (Orthodox and Protestant) to seek ways of common appeal to the government. Declarations of mutual recognition and respect, careful delineation of religious boundaries nevertheless, resulted from several rounds of Orthodox-Baptist dialogue. Much of the dialogue of this period was due to Bolgashvili (Tbilisi), an educated presbyter who began preaching about icons, liturgy, reverence for the cross and the Theotokos. When the superintendant for the ECB churches in the Caucasus attempted to have him removed as pastor, the local members resisted. A bit later, the new Georgian Catholicos, Patriarch Ilia II, served as president of the WCC (1977-1983). The resultant ecumenical inter-actions in Georgia itself (pp. 206f) continued till about 1983, the author citing the common affirmation on icons, worship and compromise over national or cosmopolitan patriotism. Like the Lima report on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (1982), Songulashvili stresses that the Georgian dialogues ended in a document that was pneumatological, kenotic, eucharistic and practical--"meant to make a missiological impact" (p. 219). Then another identity shift followed with the break-up of the Soviet Union (1991) including the rise of extreme religious nationalism within the Georgian Orthodox.

The fourth chapter opens with a photo of the consecration of Rosudan Gotziridze as the "first Baptist woman bishop," with later text listing several Georgian Orthodox clerics who attended, despite their church not yet ready for such innovation and soon led by a Catholicos very different from Ilia II. So the subsequent developments might be described as a two-stage process. That is, the Georgian Baptists opened their own seminary, after the dissolution of the USSR and its centralized church structures. Those seminary graduates became the chief activists

in the reform of the ECB churches into a 'mission in culture.' They had learned to value the best of Orthodoxy over the ages. To put it pithily, "by giving up the [baptistic] iconoclastic tradition, the ECB came closer to the people." They incorporated veneration of the cross, of icons, candles, the ECB no longer condemning, while "its preachers interpreted them in the process of sharing the Gospel" (p. 237).

Most readers may find such a tale of unexpected, counter-typical developments quite fascinating, but the most significant part of the book is its practical and theoretical delineation of a missiology of engagement with culture. In Songulashvili's presentation, its main dimensions were "sociopolitical and religio-liturgical" (p. 310). Readers might surprise themselves when imagining how, in regions they know, such a serious missiological engagement with culture, that is, one of "critical solidarity" (p. 320f), might advance global Christian unity more noticeably "so that the world might believe" (John 17:21). In a key sentence to explain enculturation, the author, also citing British and American literature, declared: "The theological basis of enculturation is God's own enculturation through incarnation; therefore enculturation is discovering the fuller meaning of God's culture-shaped mission and communicating it to the people concerned" (p. 317). Referring to Eugene Nida's classic, *Message and Mission*, with reference to the oral dimensions of communication naming at least six forms --"gesture, dance, drama, music, plastic art, and painting" (p. 318)--he goes on to lament that the evangelical tradition used "speech and music," avoiding the others due to fear of idolatry or heresy. For Georgian Baptists, it was the post 1991 opening to ties with the broader world when they introduced "Georgian dance and choreography into the liturgical setting," noting that they were "inspired by African churches" (p. 322).

The church reforms included developing a variety of "apostolates of mission," such as

heralding, sharing the gospel in words and beauty, social service, discipleship, prophetic voice on behalf of peace and justice, care for creation--all of these more widely recognizable in missiological literature. For Georgians, the apostolates of "liturgy and beauty" became the most prominent (p. 323). Yet these two, says the author, ". . . have been treated by missiology as Cinderellas" (p. 323). Even if a small church within Georgia, Songulashvili shows how the Georgian ECB was shaping culture, by "presence, affirmation, and critique" (pp. 332-6). Its presence inside the culture might be seen as "a monastic movement of committed men and women." The affirmations include the best of Georgian literature, etc. and the "critiquing of the unaffirmable" including human greed, "nationalism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, homophobia and ethnocentrism," that require risk taking because open critiques were and still are not safe (p. 335).

During the many world mission congresses of 2010 (commemorating the Edinburgh conference of 1910), none took the Caucasus and central Asian countries seriously, not even Russia and Ukraine. Their scholars were mostly absent. After two decades of post-Soviet witness, much has happened that has been published in Russian and Ukrainian, sometimes also in English and German, but the mystery remains why persons like Songulashvili, Michael Cherenkov, Andrei Puzynin, or Peter Penner, to name but a few, are not yet viewed as having a desired presence at the tables of missiological discourse. Since this book appeared, it too has not yet been widely reviewed in mission journals.

Perhaps a few comments about Songulashvili's sources may invite broader interest. Due apparently to the long tradition of British missionary interest (especially Anglican) in Georgia and Armenia (near the edge of the British Empire), Songulashvili's external sources are largely British--both Baptist and Anglican--but very little comes from America. The translated material

from Georgian sources is invaluable, much more than merely Baptist documents. It makes for an interesting read, but without the major role of German language literature on Orthodox and Free Church traditions, and from America, including the missionaries--who in quite contradictory ways showed the extremes of evangelical perspectives, that were being taught or demonstrated in the post-Soviet era. Tthe perspective is incomplete. It would seem that ecumenically and missiologically speaking, there is much catching-up to do. Songulashvili's book needs to be on a list of absolutely necessary reading in preparation for the dialogues that must come.

POSTSCRIPT: While reading and writing the review above, two issues of Mark Elliott's *East-West Church & Ministry Report,* arrived (Summer 2016 and Fall 2016) with lengthy excerpts from Songulashvili's book under the title: "A Merging of Protestant and Orthodox Theology and Practice: Evangelical Christian Baptists of Georgia." The two issues also included five reviews, all by highly reputable scholars. Elliott sought "to recruit multiple critiques of a truly path-breaking study," but no Russian Evangelical or Orthodox voices responded. Perhaps those will still come. I delayed reading the reviews till my own review above was done.

Readers should check the issues for themselves (www.eastwestreport.org), but a few phrases are worth quoting here. James Stamoolis, long a missiologist at Wheaton College and administrator at Trinity International University, known for his *Eastern Orthodox Mission Theology Today* (which, without his prior knowledge, was translated into Russian by Father Ivan Fedorov as textbook for mission, following the Russian Orthodox Synod's 1994 call for teaching missiology to seminarians) drew attention to the fact that the apostle to Georgia, St. Nino, a woman, provided the author with "ample justification for ordaining women into all ranks of the clergy." Noting the vested clergy in some Baptist traditions, his review of the usual primary Baptist emphases allowed him to remark that "on many basics of the faith, Orthodox and

Evangelicals are in substantial agreement" (p. 5). Romanian theologian Danut Manastireanu, with two decades of theological oversight of World Vision International's programs in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, was also a frequent interlocutor with Malkhaz Songulashvili as the 'transformations' in Georgia proceeded. His approach is to see parallels and differences between the Georgian story and the Lord's Army (an Orthodox lay piety movement in Romania), both seeking renewal by valuing and challenging the dominant Orthodoxy in Georgia and Romania respectively, the Georgian spirituality more "contemplative" in the western Catholic and Protestant traditions, the Romanian drawing from continental Pietism, with the Georgian social service engagement rather distinctly contextual. Paul Crego, CAREE member for decades, specialist on Georgian and Armenian history and languages, offers two considerations: the Georgian Orthodox and the much smaller Evangelical communities both felt the heavy imperial Russian and Soviet yoke, so that a post-Soviet independent Georgia allows both traditions to find ways of worship that Georgians recognize from a longer history. David Bundy, with a broad background in the history of Christianity, argues that "the positive conscience-driven ethic of the Evangelical Christian Baptist Church … represented by Songulashvili and the Peace Cathedral of Tbilissi, is consistent with the history of Georgian Baptists" (p. 10). Finally, Valeriy A. Alikin, President of St. Petersburg Christian University, notes that because of the mission imperative, the Georgian Baptists "have understood Orthodox culture to be a gift to assist them" in witness to Georgians. His short review most explicitly poses the question "whether any Church should compromise key elements of its tradition in order to reach people for Christ," since obstacles to Christian unity and Christian credibility before the world are rooted in earlier divisions. Alikin's positive answer to Songulashvili is that "one should speak of the emergence of a new church tradition" (p. 15).