Review of Malkhaz Songulashvili, *Evangelical Christian Baptists of Georgia: The History and Transformation of a Free Church Tradition* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2015)

Reviewer: Joshua T. Searle

This is by far the finest book on the evangelical movement in the former Soviet Union that I have ever read. The former Archbishop of the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia (EBC), Malkhaz Songulashvili, has produced a compelling book that draws on an impressive array of historical and theological archival material in order to narrate the intricate and remarkable – and at times quite moving – history of the Georgian Baptist movement. In this formidable work, Songulashvili offers the most comprehensive study of the evangelical movement in Georgia yet to have appeared in the English language.

The author’s erudition is immense. Although the focus is on the theological aspects, this is an inter-disciplinary work that draws liberally on the insights of philosophy, history and the political and social sciences. The work draws extensively on original archival sources in Russian, Georgian and German as well as in English. Songulashvili’s formidable erudition is worn lightly as he narrates the history of the Georgian Baptist movement with balance and sensitivity to the nuances of evangelical identity within Georgia’s unique religious and geo-political context.

At one level, the book is a dispassionate history of the Georgian Baptist movement. At a deeper level it sets out a vision of how the church can remain in “critical solidarity” with its host culture while at the same time “judiciously addressing the political reality in which the church’s mission was set” (xxi).

The author remarks that in common with the primitive Christian community, the evangelical churches in Georgia “were conceived and formed in an ideologically antagonistic milieu in which they sought to carry out God’s mission” (85). However, notwithstanding the persecution from the Russian Orthodox Church and the Soviet authorities, the author demonstrates that the EBC not only survived, but also grew numerically and qualitatively and in ways which enabled the Baptist community to participate actively in public life in the aftermath of the USSR’s demise.

As a leader of the Georgian Baptist community, the author is a “participant observer” of the history that he narrates. Throughout the book, the author describes openly his struggles to confront the ecclesiastical pathologies of sexism, nationalism, xenophobia (particularly Islamophobia) and bigoted homophobic attitudes, all of which were prevalent within the church. Songulashvili also candidly describes his struggles arising from the tension of trying to remain wholeheartedly committed to his evangelical Baptist identity while retaining a generous and open attitude of hospitality and friendship towards those from other faith traditions. He remarks that, “my friendship and partnership with Muslims is a source of much joy and comfort for me” (xxvii). Moreover, page 313 displays a photograph of the author, as the Head of the EBC, washing the feet of the Muslim Sheik of All Georgia, as a sign of solidarity and repentance for the acts of a group of Orthodox “Christian” policeman who raided the village of Tsikhisdziri, beating and humiliating Muslim citizens, who were identified as such by the fact that they were not wearing crosses on their chests.

The Introduction provides a lucid and concise summary of the Baptist movement in Georgia and its relation to broader trends in the history of the European Baptist churches in Europe. In the summary of the origins of Baptist Christianity in Europe, the author arguably overstates the role of Johann Oncken. At one point Songulashvili claims that, “The spread of the Baptist movement in Europe is to be attributed to one man, Johann Oncken” (21). If this definition of ‘Europe’ includes Russia and the Caucasus, this seems to be an exaggeration, considering the key role of other leading figures, including other foreign missionaries, such as Granville Waldegrave (Lord Radstock) and Frederick Baedecker and Yakov Delyakov, as well as the Caucasian missionaries, Nikita Voronin, Vasili Pavlov and Vasili Ivanov – all of whom had active ministries in the Georgian capital of Tiflis. Under the influence of Onken and other influential leaders, Songulashvili highlights the pivotal role played by Georgia in the indigenisation process of the Baptist movement within the Russian Empire.

Although emphasising the distinctiveness of Georgian Baptistic identity, the author recognises that Georgian evangelicalism constitutes a synthesis of two powerful world-historical movements and traditions: the European Reformation and Eastern Orthodoxy. In chapters 2 and 3 explicitly theological themes recede into the background as the author concentrates on the historical factors that determined the unique formation of the EBC as a marginal missional movement. In chapters 4 and 5, the missiological themes come into a clearer focus, as the author elaborates a robust theology of mission in light of the *missio Dei* and enumerates the ways in which Georgian Baptists have participated in the renewal of Georgian national life since the dissolution of the USSR.

Apart from the overall narrative, the author has made some remarkable discoveries, such as the obsequious letters sent by Russian Baptists on the death of Lenin, in which the Russian Baptist leaders expressed their grief at the death of the anti-Christian tyrant, who was ironically described in one telegram as “the great fighter for glorious achievement, of which religious liberty is the most precious achievement” (94). Similarly it was revealing to learn about the ways in which the EBC intentionally positioned itself in opposition to the Russian Orthodox Church on issues such as the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami and the 2010 Haiti Earthquake, which the Head of the ROC had attributed to God’s wrath against the “sinful” people of Thailand and Haiti. Songashvili felt responsible as a leader of the EBC “for making clear that the punishment theory is not part of the Christian message” (244).

Notwithstanding the struggle and hardship that typify the historical experience of the Georgian Baptist community, Songulashvili’s book resounds with hope, particularly in the descriptions of how the EBC has sought to infuse the public space with spiritual values of compassion, forgiveness and solidarity – not least through its ministry to the disabled and in its commitment to gender equality and to respectful dialogue between evangelical Christians and their Muslim neighbours.

Songulashvili succeeds in his stated aim of demonstrating that the EBC has a unique missiological story. This study is a model for scholars aspiring to write the history of evangelical movements in other neglected parts of the world. Therefore, beyond its specific historical setting, this book possesses outstanding merits in its compelling elucidation of the salient issues of identity, tolerance, human dignity, hospitality, solidarity, reconciliation and inclusivity, which are missional challenges for the global church. Anyone who cares about the future of mission – not just in Georgia and the former USSR, but also in its global context – will have cause for rejoicing in the publication of this outstanding book.

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