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LITURGY AND REVOLUTION PART I:
Georgian Baptists and the Non-violent Struggle for Democracy
by W. Benjamin Boswell

W. Benjamin Boswell is a second year doctoral student at Catholic University of America. This paper was done for a course at Duke University for the Master of Divinity Degree. The author wishes to thank Dr. Paul Crego for assistance in clarifying his narrative on Georgian political and religious history. Boswell is also associate pastor of Baptist Temple Church in Alexandria VA.

On November 9th 1989 the border between East and West Germany was reopened and the Berlin Wall that had divided East from West was torn down, along with the "Iron Curtain" of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic(s). It would be another two years before the USSR fully collapsed, but the "Iron Curtain" had been severely weakened with the loss of the E. Europe satellites. In other parts of the world, particularly in the U.S., the news was seen as a symbolic triumph of democracy, the defeat of communism, and the end of the Cold War. For Eastern Europeans, however, the fall of the Berlin Wall was only the beginning of a democratic revolution that has continued for almost two decades. Democracy in Eastern Europe during this period of transition has become a highly contested political concept: a tenuous, fragile, and turbulent idea that did not appear overnight and is far from being fully realized in the present. Democracy had to be worked out "by the people" through particular liturgies and revolutions.

The Eastern European struggle for democracy has been particularly evident in the political landscape of the former Soviet Republic of Georgia. This is an essay that attempts to map the political geography of Georgia and the participation of radical democratic bodies and radical Christian bodies in the non-violent overthrow of the dictator Eduard Shevardnadze. It is my contention that these radical democratic and Christian bodies shared common liturgies that were instrumental in the successful non-violent revolution for regime change in Georgia.

The fundamental thesis of this essay is that Liturgy incites (is) Revolution[ary politics]. This seemingly simple claim is actually deceptively complex and it will take time to flesh out the implications of what this assertion might mean for democracy and

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1 By "radical democracy" here I mean not constitutional, liberal, or traditional in the political sense, and by "radical Christianity" I mean not state-established, Constantinian, or mainline in the ecclesiological sense.

2 By "liturgy" here I mean its most basic definition as "public work" or "the people's work," although I hope to move toward transference of meaning with "the church's work" in light of the Georgian experience.
Christianity. The narrative of the non-violent "Rose Revolution" that took place in Georgia will be the primary story referenced in this essay as a paradigm for 'looping back' to investigate liturgy and revolution in a concrete way, and will serve as a catalyst for the "looping out" that takes place in analytical reflection.

Georgian Political History and Democratic Revolution

Georgia has a rich and conflicted political history. In antiquity the two prominent Georgian regions were known as Iberia and Colchis, which were fought over by both the Persians and the Byzantine Empire. As a result the two kingdoms disintegrated into various feudal regions in the Middle Ages. This made it easy for Arabs to conquer Georgia in the 7th century. In the Medieval period the Georgian Kingdom, which had been united in the 11th century, was almost completely decimated as a result of subsequent wars against their neighboring countries. During the late 18th and early 19th century Georgia came under Russian subjugation through the Treaty of Georgievsk. After the Russian Revolution of 1917 Georgia declared its independence from Russia on May 26th, 1918 in the midst of the Russian Civil War. However on February 25th 1921 Georgia was attacked and conquered by the Bolshevik's Red Army and incorporated into the Transcaucasian Federative Soviet Socialist Republic (TFSSR).

The Georgian-born radical Joseb Jughashvili who was prominent among the Russian Bolsheviks, came to power in the Russian Empire after the October Revolution of 1917. He is better known by his nom de guerre: Joseph Stalin. Stalin was theologically trained in a Georgian seminary where he learned to read Marx and became convinced of the political superiority of Communism. He would eventually rise to the highest position of the Soviet state and rule ruthlessly. The people of Georgia have been profoundly shaped by their participation in Communism, by their bonds as a nation to the political leader Joseph Stalin (a native of Georgia), and by Russian Soviet politics.

The Georgian-born Eduard Shevardnadze became the USSR's Georgian minister for foreign affairs after WWII, and was one of the main architects of the perestroika reforms that took place in the late 1980's during Gorbachev's glasnost era. During this period of reform Georgia developed a vigorous multiparty system that strongly favored independence, and the country staged the first democratic multiparty parliamentary elections in the Soviet Union on October 28th, 1990. In 1995 and 2000 Shevardnadze was officially elected and re-elected as
the president of Georgia. Over time however, he proved to be an ineffective leader because of his complicity in widespread government corruption and his failure to rein in human rights abuses.

During Shevardnaze's first presidency the Liberty Institute was formed in response to actions taken by the Georgia Ministry of Communications to shut down the broadcast license of the independently controlled television station Rustavi 2. To many Georgians this move by the Shevardnaze’s government was regarded as a blatant violation of freedom of speech and a threat to independent media. At this time there were very few non-governmental organizations in Georgia and only a few civil rights groups, therefore the creation of an NGO that was focused specifically on freedom of speech was a radical development in Georgian political history.

The Liberty Institute was established as a training ground for democracy. Through civic campaigns, debates, surveys, and educational activities, the Liberty Institute strove to promote the values of civil liberty, active citizenship, public accountability, the rule of law, transparency, and the free market in public life, politics, and legislation within public agencies. As an organization the Liberty Institute was aimed to maintain and advance individual freedoms, including the freedoms of association, assembly, press, privacy, petition, religion, speech, the rights to franchise, due process of law, equal protection of law, freedom of information, and good governance for all people through legitimate and appropriate means.

While the defense of human rights was its established goal and remained its top priority, the Liberty Institute found itself branching out with an extended focus in other arenas of civic involvement, particularly with the aim to establish democratic values and to support the development of democratic institutions in Georgia. One way the Liberty Institute did this was by supporting youth movements in Georgia. As a result of the Liberty Institute's initiatives the first active youth movement Kmaara (Enough!) emerged in Georgia in 2003 and played a crucial role in defending and promoting civil and political rights in Georgia. The Liberty Institute has provided over 800 youth activists with practical training in democracy since its establishment.

In 2000, a small student movement was formed at Tbilisi State University to protest against official corruption in national universities. This network of student organizations was transformed into the youth movement Kmaara through funding and training provided by the Liberty Institute in early 2003. During that year, with funding through George Soros' Open
Society Institute the leaders of Kmara and the soon to be opposition leader Mikhail Saakashvili were flown to Serbia for training by the Serbian youth movement Otpor (Resistance), which played a pivotal role in the overthrow of Slobodan Milosevic in 2000. In Serbia, Kmara and Saakashvili encountered the non-violent political philosophy of Gene Sharp in his book *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, which had been translated into Serbian and was later translated into Georgian for Kmara.

The Georgian youth movement Kmara was organized like Otpor as a loose, decentralized network of regional cells. It intentionally avoided creating a head organization whose dismantling could have brought the entire movement to a halt. The training sessions for activists and new recruits were conducted at a recreational facility. These recruits were expected to provide autonomous leadership in their regional cells and to organize actions independently. Other dimensions of the training centered on political marketing, media relations, and the fostering of highly effective skills in debating. In addition, the trainees acquired techniques in recruiting and mass mobilization. All of Kmara’s members received these training techniques, which they incorporated into their organization, from the non-violent political strategy of Gene Sharp through Otpor’s guidance and mentorship.

Kmara initially started with small and manageable actions around local issues. They used simple but effective means of protest involving graffiti, and noisy protest marches that were highly visible, as suggested in Sharp’s work. Kmara’s small cell of non-violent activists then began actively mobilizing, strategizing, recruiting, and developing organizational strength. It was only a matter of time before Kmara activists were making daily appearances on major television stations and appeared in the headlines alongside all of the major political developments in the key Georgian newspapers. As a result, within a matter of months Kmara became a broadly recognizable name.

The activities of the student lead non-violent organizing of Kmara can be delimited into three temporal stages: 1) A pre-election and organizational phase - for the establishment of organizational branches and for discussions with opposition parties to determine positions and stances; 2) A public outreach and voter mobilization phase – where training programs for activists were launched during the summer preceding the 2003 election; 3) A phase of sustained “watchdog” actions and citizen empowerment – that fostered long term efforts to ensure accountability, transparency, and good governance. With the financial assistance and training support of the Liberty Institute, Kmara began organizing civilian groups, which were
predominantly made up of students. As election observers, the students were instructed to be vocal about the need for fair elections prior to the November 2003 Parliamentary campaigns.

The American political scientist Gene Sharp, who was deeply shaped by Gandhi and his theory of non-violent resistance, has profoundly shaped Kmara’s organizing techniques. Sharp’s handbook *From Dictatorship to Democracy* (1993) has influenced the strategies of resistance that organizations around the world have employed, most recently and notably in the youth movements of Eastern Europe, which included Kmara and their mentor organization Optor in Serbia. Sharp’s best-known book, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action* (1973), provided a pragmatic analysis of non-violent action in political engagement.

Sharp’s key contribution to political theory is his revivification of an idea stated by the 18th century philosopher David Hume that power is not monolithic, that it does not derive from some intrinsic quality of those who are in power. For Sharp, political power, the power of any state—regardless of its particular structural organization—is derived from the subjects of the state. Sharp’s fundamental political claim is that any power structure is based on the subjects’ obedience to the orders of the ruler. Therefore if the subjects do not obey, the rulers have no power. In Sharp’s view all effective power structures have systems by which they encourage or extract obedience from their subjects. States have particularly complex systems for keeping subjects obedient. These systems include specific institutions (police, courts, regulatory bodies) but may also involve cultural dimensions that inspire obedience by implying that power is monolithic (i.e. the dignity of the office of the President, moral or ethical norms or taboos, etc.) Through these systems, subjects are presented with a system of sanctions (imprisonments, fines, the ability to ostracize) and rewards (titles, wealth, fame), which influence the extent of their obedience.

All of these cultural dimensions are crucial to the possibility of non-violent resistance because they provide subjects, in Sharp’s diagnosis, a window of opportunity for affecting change within a state. It is Sharp’s contention that if the subjects of a particular state recognize that they are the source of the state’s power, they can refuse to obey, and their leader(s) will be left without power. Many people see Sharp’s work as primarily anti-Communist and pro-Democracy, and it is often claimed that the majority of his efforts have been spent on helping people to topple Communist or left-leaning governments. Based on this assessment, many pro-Russian critics of the revolution in Georgia, that Kmara
participated in using Sharp's techniques, have called the non-violent movement for
democracy a "made-in-America coup."

By the time of the elections in November of 2003, Eduard Shevardnadze's
government, and his family, had become increasingly associated with the pervasive
corruption that hampered Georgia's economic growth. The political and socioeconomic
crisis in Georgia was close to reaching its peak just before the parliamentary elections
appointed for November 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 2003. Shevardnadze was opposed by the popular opposition or
"National Movement" party leader and Liberty Institute affiliate Mikhail Saakashvili in the
elections, which were denounced by local and international observers as grossly rigged in
favor of Shevardnadze. "When the promised parliamentary elections were marred by
'spectacular irregularities' according to international observers, opposition demonstrators
took to the streets\textsuperscript{9} in protest.

Saakashvilli claimed that he had won the elections (a claim that was supported by
independent exit polls), and he urged Georgians to demonstrate against Shevardnaze's
government and engage in non-violent civil disobedience against the authorities. By mid-
November the massive anti-governmental demonstrations had filled the central streets of the
Georgian capital of Tbilisi and soon involved almost all of the major cities and towns in
Georgia. The K Mara youth organization and several other NGO's like their partner the
Liberty Institute were active in all of the protest activities. The protests reached their peak on
November 22\textsuperscript{nd}, the first day of an open session for the new parliament, which was considered
by the opposition leaders to be illegitimate.

That same day, opposition supporters lead by Mikhail Saakashvili armed with roses
in their hands as a symbol of non-violence, seized the parliament building interrupting a
speech by President Eduard Shevardnadze, which forced him to escape with his bodyguards
in fear. In his retreat, Shevardnadze declared a state of emergency and began to mobilize
military troops and police personnel near his residence in Tbilisi. To his dismay, his elite
military units refused to support the government or to act in violent opposition against the
protesters. After an impromptu meeting with opposition leaders Shevardnadze announced his
resignation on November 23\textsuperscript{rd}, which inaugurated euphoria in the streets of Tbilisi where

\textsuperscript{9} Daniel Buttry, Baptists Amid the Revolutions in Georgia, p. 1 (unpublished). Buttry is a Global Service
Missionary for Peace and Justice with the International Ministries of the American Baptist Church, and facilitated
nonviolence training for the EBCG. An abbreviated version of the manuscript made available to the author, appeared
more than 100,000 protesters celebrated the victory all night long with fireworks and rock concerts.

The non-violent Rose Revolution shook all of Georgia, even the autonomous region of Ajaria that was under the dictatorship of Aslan Abashidze. Abashidze, a Soviet-era politician like Shevardnadze, was presiding over the affairs of the province of Ajaria with almost total control. Ajaria was an autonomous republic because of the region's predominantly Muslim population, even though they are culturally, ethnically, and linguistically Georgian. Abashidze's leadership was notorious for participation in corruption and human rights violations. The tension between the Georgian government and that of Ajaria increasingly became more conflicted after the elections in November until late April. The tension rose to a climax on May 1st when Abashidze responded to military maneuvers held by Georgians near the region of Ajaria by destroying three bridges that connected Ajaria with the rest of Georgia over the Choloki River.

The non-violent youth movement Kmara proved to be instrumental again in the removal of the regime of Abashidze and the liberation of Ajaria. After months of extreme tension between Saakashvili's government and Abashidze, thousands of Ajarans mobilized by the United National Movement and Kmara protested against Abashidze's policy of separatism and militarization. The autonomous regions seemed to be on the brink of civil war when the people's movement instigated by Kmara erupted. Opposition arose primarily among students and teachers in the Ajarian provincial capital of Batumi, where Abashidze used security forces and paramilitary groups armed with water cannons, iron rods, and batons to break up the demonstrations in the streets.

On May 6th, 2004, protesters from all over Ajaria gathered again in the streets of Batumi despite having been broken up heavily by security forces the day before. More than 60 people had been hospitalized in the previous day's protests. On this day, however, the crowd of protesters swelled to around 15,000. Abashidze was forced to flee Georgia as mass demonstrations in Batumi called for his resignation. After surrendering to the protests, Abashidze resigned the same evening and left for Moscow. The new Georgian President Saakashvili visited Batumi the next day and was greeted as a liberator by the people of Ajaria. Because of the non-violent determination of the people, Georgia was able to avoid an all out civil war that almost erupted in Ajaria in the spring of 2004.

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4Ibid., p. 2.
5Ibid.

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After the Rose Revolution all but one of the founding members of the Liberty Institute were elected to the Parliament of Georgia. Givi Targamadze, a former leader of the Liberty Institute who was elected chair of the Georgian Parliamentary Committee on Defense and Security, was consulted by Ukrainian opposition leaders on the techniques of non-violent struggle that Targamadze had inherited from Gene Sharp by way of training with the Serbian youth organization Optor. Therefore, the Georgian Rose Revolution probably inspired the Orange Revolution that followed the disputed November 2004 Ukrainian presidential election. Georgian flags were seen being waved by the supporters of Viktor Yushchenko, who also held up a rose while greeting the crowds. Later in 2005 Targamadze also advised the leaders of the Kyrgyz opposition during the Tulip Revolution in that region of Eastern Europe.

Levan Ramishvili, the only founding member of the Liberty Institute who was not elected to Parliament, stayed at the Liberty Institute and he continues to work together with a new generation of civic activists, most of them leaders of the Kmara movement who took jobs working for the Liberty Institute after the revolutions.

Georgian Religious History and Ecclesiological Revolution

In late antiquity the kingdom of Georgia was known to the Greco-Roman world as divided between Iberia in the east and Colchis in the west, and it was one of the first nations in the Eastern European region to adopt Christianity (Iberia – 317 AD & Colchis – 523 AD) through the missionary efforts of St. Nino, who preached the gospel, healed the sick, and converted the pagan king and queen who ruled there. Georgia has always been a diverse nation both ethnically and religiously due to the relatively long periods of toleration that have occurred in that region among Muslims, Jews, and Christians scattered about historically from the medieval period to the present.

The earliest known evidence of religious practice in the region was associated with a pagan cult that worshipped the moon and the highest god in the Georgian pantheon was the idol of Amiazi, a soldier-figure, the Moon-god, in whose honor a shrine was erected at the hill in Mtskheta. The large majority of the pagan idols were destroyed in the fourth century when Christianity became the state religion of Georgia. Amidst various wars Georgia's religious majority fluctuated on multiple occasions, however, during the Soviet period the Georgian Orthodox Church was partially solidified as the state religion. Communist anti-
religiosity had almost destroyed the GOC, which only truly began to make a comeback under Patriarch-Catholicos Ilia II who was enthroned in 1977.

During the presidency of Eduard Shevardnadze the Orthodox Church became intolerant of religious minorities, particularly those that considered themselves to be non-Orthodox Christians. Anti-ecumenical feelings have always been an intra-Orthodox struggle that continues to divide Orthodox churches. The intolerance of the Georgian Orthodox, in particular, is tied up with the developments of national self-identity in the post-Soviet period. Following the leadership of Father Basil Mkalavishvili the Orthodox Church of Georgia withdrew from the World Council of Churches and embarked on a campaign of terror and persecution against non-state churches, which they disparagingly referred to as "sects." Among those minorities were Georgian Baptists. In resistance, Fr. Basil was subsequently defrocked by Ilia and excommunicated; he then joined up with Orthodox Church of Greece Holy Synod.6

The Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia (EBCG) was officially established after the fall of the Soviet Union, but Baptists have been practicing in Georgia since 1867. The Baptist Church of Georgia has suffered a great deal. During its history it has been persecuted by Czarist Russians, by the Bolsheviks, various nationalist groups, the Communists, and most recently by the Orthodox Church. Members sent from the Orthodox Church have assassinated many of its leaders. Under the czars in the Soviet period the Georgian Church was part of the Russian Orthodox Church. After the collapse of the communist system, the Orthodox Church in Georgia sought to recapture the place of prominence as the state church that it did not have under Czarist rule nor during the Soviet period.7 Under Father Basil Mkalavishvili's reign of terror, a number of Baptist churches were burned; many Baptist pastors were beaten, and ecumenical prayer services were attacked, all in the name of religious nationalism. A Baptist owned and operated Bible Society warehouse was torched in February of 2002, on orders from Mkalavishvili and other Orthodox leaders, which left 17,000 Bibles destroyed.

It has been reported that the Baptist Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili, when encountering the destroyed facility, placed a burnt Bible that was salvaged from the warehouse on the altar of his own home chapel with the solemn vow that it will remain as a visible sign there until religious liberty is achieved for all the people of Georgia no matter

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6 http://www.synodinresistance.org/Publications_en/AgiosKyprianos.html
7 Ibid., p. 3.
what their faith may be.\textsuperscript{6} Upon hearing of the burned warehouse, the BBC set up an interview with Metropolitan Athanasios of Rustavi, who was the second hierarch of Ilia's Georgian Orthodox Church, to question him about the torching of the Baptist Bible Society. Athanasios was unapologetic about the destruction, and boldly asserted that as far as he was concerned it would be fine if all Baptists were dead!\textsuperscript{7}

Georgian Baptists were not disheartened or paralyzed with fear by these events, instead they responded by participating significantly in the non-violent revolutions that resulted from the electoral fraud of President Eduard Shevardnadze. During the days of the Rose Revolution, Baptists were actively protesting alongside opposition party leaders and even extended hospitality by bringing hot drinks and food to the demonstrators during the cold and rainy hours of the revolution.\textsuperscript{8} Alongside the Georgian flags (a neo-medieval flag with five blood red crosses) flown by Saakashvili and opposition leaders in Tbilisi Freedom Square flew the flag of the EBCG, which was designed with an ancient cross from monastic cave paintings found in the Georgian desert. The Baptist flags provided the only visible religious presence of any kind during the revolutionary democratic movement.\textsuperscript{9} When demonstrators armed with roses non-violently stormed the Presidential office building during the illegitimate Parliamentary session, a Baptist named Lela Karvelishvili, who worked for the Liberty Institute, carried the Baptist flag into Shevardnadze's office as a religious symbol of revolutionary power.\textsuperscript{10}

Success in Tbilisi did not complete the Baptist church's participation in the revolution for democracy. When people swarmed the streets of Batumi, to oppose the dictator Aslan Abashidze, Baptists stood along side the demonstrators. After violent opposition by Abashidze's security forces the atmosphere felt as if full blown civil war was inevitable. The next morning, it has been reported that Baptist Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili crossed over into Ajaria fully clothed in his traditional purple clerical regalia, climbed over the rubble of a bridge that had been destroyed and spoke to the crowds.\textsuperscript{11} He proclaimed to the protesters an affirmation of their vision for democracy, encouragement for their revolution, and issued a call for disciplined non-violence as was demonstrated in

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{6} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{7} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{8} Ibid., p. 1.
  \item \textsuperscript{9} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{11} Ibid., p. 2.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
By the end of the day it was clear that the movement was successful, and Abashidze escaped to refuge in Moscow while protesters celebrated in the streets.

Daniel Buttry, who is a Global Service Missionary for Peace and Justice with the International Ministries of the American Baptist Church, and who has facilitated nonviolence training for the EBCG, recorded the thoughts of the Georgian Baptists as they reflected on the revolution. He said, “they spoke about a re-birth of hope among them. They said they experienced a common, corporate sense of hope for the future in that they could change their own reality. For the first time in their memory people had expressed their own will politically.”

The Baptists felt especially proud of the non-violent character of the revolution, as Bishop Songulashvili expressed, “Now we realize that we may raise our voice against injustice without violence. We experienced the power of non-violent opposition, and for the people of the Caucasus this is something entirely new.”

Baptist involvement in the social and political revolutions flowed out of a revolution that happened within the Baptist churches in Georgia, which Baptist leaders refer to as a “reform” movement to contextualize the gospel in Georgian culture in continuity with their unique spiritual heritage. For the EBCG, their radically reformed internal liturgical life compelled, incited, and provoked them externally into radical democratic participation in revolutionary political action. Bishop Songulashvili explains, “The worshiping of God is the core of the life of the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia. All the activities of the church are related to its worship. The worship (liturgia) is a source for the witnessing of the Gospel (marturia) and for serving the neighbor (diaconia).” Historically it can be argued that the EBCG began as a monastic reform movement within the Orthodox Church of Georgia. The concrete concept of Baptists as a reforming movement in Orthodoxy is a unique and important development in ecclesiology. Baptists in Georgia embraced their rich tradition of Christian practice that can be traced back through St. Nino and to the early Christian monastic movements that created monasteries in the Georgian desert caves. The walls of those caves are decorated with beautiful frescoes that have become icons for the Georgians, like the cross that the EBCG chose to emblazon on their liturgical banner.

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14 Ibid.
15 Buttry, p. 1.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., p. 2.
18 Malkhaz Songulashvili, interview correspondence 4/27/06.
Buttry contends that “while retaining belief in believer’s baptism, autonomy of the local church, freedom of conscience and religious liberty, the Georgian Baptists sought to weave together ancient expressions of faith with contemporary Georgian cultural forms.”

According to Buttry, the EBCG continues to celebrate with contemporary liturgical dance and ancient art from the monastic caves, they paint icons and burn incense during their Eucharistic prayers, they ordain women to the ministry, and they have retained the monastic tradition by launching specific monastic orders for both men and women. As Bishop Songulashvili articulates,

The Baptist Church technically should be considered as a Reformed Orthodox Church. On the one hand, we are committed to the principles of the Radical European Reformation, and on the other hand we hold to our own Orthodox legacy. This identity of ours (both Western and Eastern) helps us to play a bridge building role between Georgian and Western civilizations. This is an important advantage for the Baptists of Georgia to promote democracy in Georgian society.

The structure of the Georgian church is a mixture of congregational and Episcopal polity. The local congregations continue to maintain their autonomy from one another and the state, but the Bishop is the head of the entire church, as the office is the symbol of unity for the entire Baptist Church in Georgia. The primary responsibility of the Bishop in the EBCG is to provide spiritual guidance to the whole church as prophet, preacher, and teacher of the Gospel. The associational duties of administration are carried out by another office that has been delineated as the president of the church, who is nominated by the church and approved by the national assembly. The president is directly accountable to the Bishop and the Synod of the church. When the Bishop is elected and consecrated it is a lifetime appointment to that office, although he or she can resign at any time if they wish to do so. A threefold order of bishops, presbyters, and deacons facilitates the EBCG in their mission to Georgian society and to their recognition of the church as an ecumenical partner. The EBCG is a dynamic interweaving of the most advantageous tenets of Free Church and Orthodox ecclesiology.

Because of their rich ethno-religious heritage and long history of Christian practice, the Georgian Baptists were able to establish a free church in continuity to the greater Baptist tradition without an allergy to all things Orthodox or Catholic. This blend of Free Church ecclesiology and Orthodox worship provided the EBCG with the theological tradition and the

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19 Buttry, p. 3.
20 Ibid.
21 Matkaz Songulashvili, interview correspondence on 4/27/06.
litrugical resources to confront persecution and to significantly participate in the revolution for democracy. Buttry has observed that the Georgian people were drawn to the Evangelical-Baptist churches where a vibrant gospel was being preached in a Georgian cultural accent that draws deeply from the rich history of Christian practice in the region.22 “On any given Sunday at the Central Baptist Church in Tbilisi,” Buttry says, “the gathered congregation fills the sanctuary to overflowing, with younger people crowding at the doorways to participate in the services.”21 It is at the Central Baptist Church, Tbilisi, where their revolutionary liturgy begins to take shape.

Central Baptist Church follows the traditional liturgical calendar, which takes its shape from the Revised Common Lectionary word that is recited and preached. The lectionary is a revolutionary time that revolves around the Christian calendar in the same way that the earth revolves on its axis and around the sun. What makes lectionary time revolutionary is that it does not keep time by following the earth’s rotations, nor does it keep time by the traditional Roman calendar, but is centered around the Easter event where the rest of the liturgical year finds and receives its meaning. Holy Week is the highest liturgical time during Central Baptist’s lectionary cycle, and it is the Passion event that the EBCG continues to revolve around once every year, thereby charting an alternative time that confronts the world’s time and orders the life of the EBCG.

The EBCG is the largest and most influential Protestant church in Georgia as well as in the entire region of the Caucasus. The Central Baptist Church in Tbilisi is the mother church of all Baptist churches in Georgia. The foundation of Baptist work and ministry started there in 1867. Central Baptist Church is the spiritual and social center for the vision of the EBCG and its characteristic feature is religious, ethnic and political tolerance. The Cathedral is made up of four different Baptist congregations: Georgian speaking, Russian Speaking, Armenian speaking, and Ossetian speaking congregations.24 Each congregation has their own leadership and infrastructure. The Tbilisi church is the most active location for the ecclesiological reforms that are motivated under the new circumstances in the post-communist transitional environment of religious life in Georgia. This congregation has been uniquely involved in the acute struggle for the defense of human rights and religious freedom and continuously declares its negative attitude towards religious fanaticism and intolerance.

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21 Buttry, p. 3.
22 Ibid.
24 Tetralingual was signed in 1990; this may no longer be the case.
Central Baptist Church Cathedral in Tbilisi's commitment to ecumenical dialogue and religious toleration was put to the test on January 24th, 2003 when during an annual ecumenical service of Prayer for Christian Unity the church was attacked by the well known religious "terrorists" associated with Father Basil Mkalavishvili. In the face of violent persecution, the Central Baptist Church continued to spread its mission of unity and peace throughout the country of Georgia.

As the social work of the Central Baptist Church began to grow dramatically, they realized that a place for serving the poor and destitute, for training and education, and for administration would be necessary for continued efforts in mission the people of Georgia. The Beteli center was created as a shelter and home for the elderly, and as a place to house the diaconal order of St. Nino, the school of Elijah (ministerial training), the school of Iconography, the school of liturgical dance, the school of Solomon (training in languages and computer skills), the school of David (liturgy and music), the school of Abraham (Islamic studies), as well as the Sunday school for the Cathedral.

Beteli is taken from the Hebrew, which means "the house of God." For the EBCG "the house of God" belongs to everybody and that is why the Baptists have decided that the center would be created as a multipurpose building. The vision for the Beteli center is to become a multipurpose center where a number of projects seeking to help the Georgian people and Georgian society can meet to recover and to develop projects and plans for their daily work. In Georgian society the people struggle daily to bring food to their tables, to clothe their children, and to put roofs over their heads. Even with the new changes toward a more democratic direction for Georgia in the aftermath of the Rose Revolution many people are still struggling to survive and to find meaning for their lives. The schools are still in bad shape and the unemployment rate is high. The goal of the Beteli center is to reach out to the people of Georgia and to give them hope and a chance for the future. As an organization the Baptists at the Beteli center want to become an example to society of how they have been called as people to love their neighbors.

The economic situation in Georgia is especially depressing for the elderly population. The pension level is only about seven dollars a month, however, many pensioners are often unable to receive that stipend. This economic strain creates a tremendous longing for the past, when life economically was not so difficult and that nostalgia breeds political ideologies that have been detrimental to the Georgian people. The primary function of the Beteli center
is to provide residential care for the elderly, many of whom are desperately poor and neglected by society. The Beteli center cares for the elderly so that they can live the last part of their lives in this world with dignity in gratitude and supplication to God. If it were not for the Beteli center a considerable number of these vulnerable people would die on the streets of Tbilisi.

Among the many groups that meet at the Beteli center are the sisters of the order of St. Nino. St. Nino’s order was created in December 1998 with significant support from the German Diakonische Werke, in order to organize the social work throughout the country of Georgia. The order has sixteen stations throughout the country and each station has a head sister and a number of volunteers. The sisters of St. Nino’s order have the full liberty to discern whether God is calling them into vows of celibacy or into fidelity to a spouse in marriage. The order offers equal opportunities for service and ministry for both celibate and married women who often commit to live together. In an average day the sisters of St. Nino serve about four hundred people in the country of Georgia in the spirit of the saint that first brought Christianity to Iberia (Kartli) and further east in Kaxeti (or Kakheti).

Due to the heavy socio-economic hardships that Georgians face and the high rate of youth and adult immigration to Georgia, there are an innumerable number (250,000) of uncared for and lonely, physically disabled and/or mentally handicapped people in Georgia. The sisters of St. Nino’s order provide multilateral care in the form of providing food and medicine to the most undervalued members of society. Professional medical doctors govern each of the six regional staff operations and volunteers provide considerable assistance, including food, bathing, and basic first aid to those who could otherwise not afford the services. Through the sisters of the order of St. Nino, the EBCG has been able to mount an impressive ministry to the poor, the disabled, and the elderly people of Georgia.

The New Desert Brothers is an additional diaconal association that was established as an order concerned with a return to the spirituality of the desert fathers of the early church. The New Desert Brothers were developed in order to help the Christians of Georgia survive the difficulties and challenges of the stressful contemporary religious climate in Georgia that is often hostile toward those with profound Christian convictions. Their most formative discipline entails an annual silent retreat of thirty days in the desert wilderness. By returning to the ancient Christian practices of wilderness, fasting, desert living, contemplative prayer, and work ethics the New Desert Brothers have established a new monasticism within the
monastic movement that is the EBCG, which confronts the world by temporarily retreating from it for periods of deep renewal and spiritual formation before returning to live in among and care for those who are struggling and in need. Their internal “looping back” entails an external “looping out.”

Theological education is an important part of the ministry of the Evangelical Baptist Church. There are two primary means available for the theological education of ministers in the EBCG. The first is through the Baptist Theological Seminary that was originally established in 1993 in the Eastern Georgian province of Kakheti in the town of Gurjaani. Due to the bloody civil war and ethnic conflict taking place at that time in Georgia the beginnings of Baptist theological education were very difficult. However, even amidst the violence Baptists were able to establish the first Baptist educational center in Georgia. In 1998 the seminary was moved to the capital city of Tbilisi because of financial problems, and a branch was established in Kutaisi as the growing number of Baptists churches requested theologically trained ministers.

The contemporary religious and social circumstances in Georgia are a solid platform for the broad active mission of the EBCG in their theological education. The purpose of theological education in Georgia is highly important for the continuation of the EBCG. Baptists in Georgia have the fundamental experience and capacity in the field of social relief, Christian mission, and political engagement to make a profound contribution to theological education in those areas. Congregations in Georgia recognize the significance of well-trained ministers for the proclamation and embodiment of the Christian message for the population of Georgia that suffers under burdensome social and economic conditions as well as entrenched political ideologies of religious nationalism.

Theological education in Georgian seminaries can take up to seven years to complete, therefore the EBCG established the School of Elijah to provide a shorter and more basic theological training that will soon be obligatory for all Baptist ministers in Georgia. The School of Elijah intentionally invites experts in Christian theological education and ministry from Western countries to come and to prepare teaching materials in advance so that they can be translated into Georgian and approved by the board of advisors for teaching in Georgian seminaries. The project is named after the prophet Elijah who was taken off by chariots and left his disciple behind. It is the goal of this program to allow Eastern and Western ministers and theologians to learn from one another and for Western visiting theologians to lecture and
mentor young Georgian Baptist ministers and to continue to guide them from afar once they have returned home.

One of the requirements for teaching at the Georgian seminaries as a Westermer is a passion for ecumenical dialogue. The EBCG is strongly committed to ecumenical dialogue with all other Baptist churches and with churches from different ecclesiological traditions. The EBCG has been involved in ecumenical dialogue in a particular way with the Church of England. Bishop Malkhaz has fostered a relationship with the Church of England and through them to other outposts, such as the Episcopal Church in the US. The Baptists in Georgia have benefitted in many ways from the support of the Church of England, and those links that were created between the Baptist Church in Georgia and the British Anglican Communion have facilitated reconciliation and dialogue with the Orthodox Church in Georgia as well.

The Anglican Communion has participated in Baptist struggles for religious liberty and human rights in Georgia through the work of the former Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey, and through the ministry of Bishop Stephen Platten. The ecumenical cooperation between Anglicans and Baptists has served to strengthen the political witness of the EBCG and has further enabled them to represent a prophetic voice to a post-communist society during the non-violent revolutions for democracy. Anglicans have supported the EBCG financially in the building of the Beteli center, through funding their large-scale humanitarian relief work, in the establishment of a chaplaincy program for the Georgian prisons and Armies, and in continued support of the School of Elijah with monetary donations and through visiting professorships.

Ecumenical partnership between the EBCG and the Anglican Communion has been made possible primarily because of the rich continuity in their respective liturgical and theological traditions. Probably the most obvious ecumenical symbol that they share is an icon of the baptism of Christ that was painted by a student from the Baptist school of Iconography, a copy of a larger mural fresco that hangs in the Cathedral Baptist Church in Tbilisi. This icon from the Georgian monastic cave paintings was given as a gift to the Anglican Communion. The icon now appears in the baptismal bay of the Norwich Cathedral.

26 Ibid., p. 88.
and serves as a symbolic representation of the common baptismal covenant that the EBCG and the Anglican Communion hope to share with one another in the future.37

As mentioned above, the liturgical character of Georgian Baptist worship is one of the reasons that Anglicans feel comfortable with the EBCG. Anglicans have found a deep appreciation for the ways in which Baptist liturgy has been enriched by certain characteristics of traditional Georgian Orthodoxy. The Georgian Baptists have been able to balance the beautiful Eastern use of sacred arts in liturgy in a way that allows for the employment of all five senses in Christian worship along with a Baptist commitment to liturgical freedom and spontaneity that is very attractive to their ecumenical partners.38 Baptists and Anglicans have learned a great deal from studying one another's liturgical and theological traditions and in addition to their rich liturgy, Baptists and Anglicans have been able to cooperate on a deeper level because of their shared ecclesiological practice of the threefold ministerial office of bishop, presbyter, and deacon.39 Baptists and Anglicans are committed to a continued partnership for the common mission of spreading the gospel to the country of Georgia, and through this partnership the EBCG has taken steps toward a more radical form of ecumenical dialogue that is both ecumenical reconciliation dialogue with their enemies the Georgian Orthodox and ecumenical inter-religious dialogue with their neighbors the Chechen Muslims.

Baptist Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili has been an inspiration to his people in his non-violent loving response to the persecution and hatred that he has witnessed and faced personally at the hands of the Georgian Orthodox Church. After hearing Metropolitan Athanasios' declaration that he would be happy to see all Baptists dead, Bishop Songulashvili personally wrote a letter to Athanasios publicly declaring his love for the Metropolitan and reminding him of their shared faith and desire for the well-being of Georgia.40 In a few months, Malkhaz was surprised to see the Metropolitan knocking on his door in a gesture of repentance, asking for forgiveness and seeking penance for his statement. The voluntary penance that he offered to the Baptist Bishop was a gift of food, candles, wine, and vodka.41 Athanasios' penitential gesture toward a common (Eucharistic) table deeply moved the Baptist Bishop reinvigorating ecumenical dialogue.

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37Ibid.
38Ibid.
39Ibid.
40Ibid.
41Burtle, p. 4.
42Ibid.
In the wake of the Rose Revolution the renegade priest Basil Mkalavishvili was arrested in March of 2004 for his violent acts against religious minorities in Georgia. He and nine of his followers were called to testify on trial with regards to their participation in the persecution. Malkhaz Songulashvili, the Baptist Bishop of the EBCG, was called to testify against Father Mkalavishvili and he spoke at their trial for three hours about the values of Christianity, the ecumenical movement, and religious liberty. The judge, lawyers, and prosecutors were attentive to his remarks and asked him poignant questions about the differences between Christians in Georgia and about the distinctive features of the Evangelical Baptist Church of Georgia. Malkhaz reported "everybody was nervous because they did no know what would be my concluding word."34

At the end of the Bishop's testimony the judge asked, "What do you wish to happen to them?" To which Malkhaz replied, "I demand that these people be pardoned and released from prison." Everyone in court was shocked at his statement. The defense lawyers could not believe their ears and they quickly asked for clarification. "Do you really want to forgive them of everything, including the material loss?" Malkhaz replied that his absolution was without condition, and he explained that this was the true nature of Christian love and forgiveness. Nobody in the courtroom could believe what he said, so the Bishop added "I do not demand anything from them except the red wine which we will drink together when they are set free." This was an obvious Eucharistic metaphor of reconciliation that caused the entire courtroom to erupt into laughter.

Then Bishop Songulashvili did something even more radical. Ignoring the rules of the court, Malkhaz rushed across the room over to the cage where the prisoners were being held and shook hands with them all, including the hand of Father Basil. Many described the event as one of the most moving experiences of their entire lives; people were crying, clapping hands, and cheering. As he left the courtroom a small boy made his way up to the Bishop and tugged on his sleeve of his purple frock and exclaimed: "Thank you Bishop." Malkhaz realized that it was Father Basil's grandson, whom he then blessed. That evening the Bishop received a message from Father Basil and the other prisoners that said, "even if we are not released from here, we will be ever grateful to you." A few days later the Bishop wrote to President Saakashvili calling for the full release and pardon of those who had persecuted him.

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31 Ibid. 
32 Ibid. 
and the Baptist church. Despite Malkhaz’ call for their release, Father Basil Mkalavishvili and his followers were sentenced to six years in prison with his associates. On the 10th anniversary of Songulashvili’s ordination as Bishop, gifts were received and well-wishes along with two small icons of Christ and the incarnation with a huge cake, all from Father Basil and his followers. Malkhaz concluded that day by saying, “In the past we were praying that Mkalavishvili would be arrested, and now we are praying that he will be released from jail.” His words were a true witness of forgiveness and reconciliation that inspired many.

Anglican Bishop Stephen Platten asserted “The Baptist Church acts as one of the key links with western churches, not only for itself but also for the Georgian Orthodox.”35 When the Georgian Orthodox church withdrew from the World Council of Churches in 1997 it became an isolated state church that was radically separated from the rest of the Christian community. The rise of religious nationalism in the Georgian Orthodox church along with the persecution of religious minorities created an anti-ecumenical climate in the country. Bishop Songulashvili’s excessive acts of reconciliation toward his persecutor Father Basil have served to reopen dialogue and partnership between the EBCG and the Georgian Orthodox Church, which had previously been closed off due to hatred, bigamy, and bitterness. In the partnerships that have been fostered, Baptists and Orthodox from Georgia have traveled together to Great Britain to learn and study the ministry that is taking place there.36 The EBCG has been a model to the Georgian Orthodox for the necessity of an ecumenical spirit in the hope for Christian unity in the Church catholic.

In addition to their tripartite partnership with the Anglican Communion, the Baptists and Orthodox in Georgia have joined together in the common quest to resist dictatorship and oppression in Eastern Europe and to participate in the revolutions for democracy that are mobilizing in that region. Malkhaz’ non-violent peacemaking activism has been infectious. In December of 2004, he brought two of his new friends from the Orthodox Church of Georgia with him to Kiev in the Ukraine. Archpriest Basil Kobkhidze, who is in great disfavor with the Georgian Orthodox Church, and Father Zaza Tevzade joined with Bishop Songulashvili and the democratic demonstrators in the Orange Revolution that took place in the Ukraine. They flew the Georgian flag as encouragement to the Ukrainians in their non-violent democratic revolution. They also visited religious leaders of both the Baptists and an Orthodox Church in the Ukraine under Patriarch Filaret that claims autocephaly for the

35 Conversations, p. 87.
36 Ibid.
Ukrainian Orthodox Church. Georgians have been in close communication with Filaret and his church; and Filaret's church supported the Orange Revolution. Baptist Bishop Songulashvili and his Orthodox partners were informed that they were the only delegation of clergy from outside of the Ukraine to come and stand in solidarity with them in their struggle. The churches in the Ukraine were very supportive of the movement for democracy. Malkhaz and his partners from the Orthodox Church were invited to participate in a prayer rally at Maidan Nezaliznosti (Freedom Square), and were asked to speak to the thousands of Ukrainian demonstrators there. The three leaders together wrote an “Appeal to the Ukrainian People” upon their departure, which has received widespread publicity. In this document they wrote:

We are delighted to observe the participation of different confessions of faith in the revolutionary events in the Ukraine. The common prayers of all the representatives of different religions, their unity, their call for non-violent resistance, makes it clear that by faith we can do things that seem impossible. Revolutionary events in Georgia and the Ukraine prove once again that we as human beings cannot accept the abuse of human dignity, lawlessness, corruption, fraud and the ignoring of the will of the people. 37

Most of the churches in Tbilisi and Batumi in Georgia had chosen a policy of “wait and see” during the Rose Revolution. In Kiev, Ukraine the churches overwhelmingly supported justice andadamantly participated in the Orange Revolution for democracy. However in Minsk, Belarus, where the Baptist/Orthodox coalition went in 2006, the attitude of the established churches there was overwhelmingly in support of the dictator. Malkhaz reported that the churches in Belarus are scared to death to upset the dictator who can ruthlessly deal with those who oppose him, and therefore Baptist ministers in Belarus had forbidden their members from participating in the Opposition Manifestation movement for democracy to remove the dictator. Bishop Songulashvili and his partners met up with the demonstrators in Minsk.

Before even the manifestation started I called all the believers there who joined us there to make a circle and pray together for the freedom and justices for the Belorussian people. Only after offering our prayers did we march with the people in the midst of the gathering. As we moved, Father Basil and I produced a well-hidden Georgian flag from our bag and held it up. Georgian “terrorists” have come, young people joyfully shouted as we moved forward. Here I must say how brave those young people in Belarus are. Some of the

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37 Burry, p.5.

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Christians who came to the square and introduced themselves to us were representatives from some Baptists churches in Belarus where their ministers had forbid them to participate in the demonstration in any way. For them our presence at the square was an immense encouragement.34

The Belorussian KGB eventually arrested Malkhaz and his partners from the Orthodox Church for their participation in the Opposition Manifestation. Fortunately the coalition from Georgia was not severely harmed during their imprisonment in Belarus, but they were deported and informed that they could not return for a period of five years. After being set free, Bishop Songulashvili was asked by both secular and Christian journalists about his illegal travel to Belarus. They asked him whether it was his business to be involved in the political life of a foreign country, was it God’s will? Some even chastised the Baptist Bishop saying that his place is in the church and not in the market place, to which Malkhaz replied:

I believe it is a pagan understanding that the activity of the clergyman should be carried on within the walls of a temple only. We as Christian leaders are not attached to the church buildings and walls but rather to the people. We should be where the people are suffering. We should be closer to those who are oppressed and humiliated, to those who are determined to fight with non-violent means against regimes that deprive people of their human dignity. As clergymen we could not, in all good conscience, stay home and watch these events unfold on television.39

The members of the Baptist/Orthodox coalition that were arrested in Belarus were charged with “terrorist” activity by both the Belorussian KGB and by the Opposition Manifestation supporters in Minsk. For the KGB the Georgian terrorists were a danger to the authority of the dictator and the Belorussian government, but for the Opposition, Georgian terrorists were a sign of solidarity with the movement for freedom, liberty, and democracy. It is hard to consider terrorists those who are committed to non-violence.

Georgian Baptists are ecumenically minded and committed to cooperation with all the churches and religions for the sake of peace, justice, and reconciliation. The radical reforms in the society of the Baptist Church in Georgia started with liturgical reforms, according to Bishop Songulashvili, because in Georgian society the way you worship God reflects what you believe and how you live.40 Liturgical reforms have paved the way for

38 Bishop Songulashvili, Belorus Liberty: How Long Will the Belorussian People Sit on a Chair with a Nail?, 3/24/2006.  
39 Ibid.  
40 Songulashvili, correspondence on 4/26/2006.
wider reform in the church, which has ultimately forged a new identity for the Georgian Baptists in post-Soviet society. Part of the reforms among Baptists in Georgia has been the intentional recovery of Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, with particular emphasis on Jesus command that Christians should love their enemies.41 Traditionally, Chechen Muslims have been the most violent enemies of the people of Georgia. Centuries ago Chechen terrorists would raid Georgia, capture Georgians, and sell them off as slaves. This caused many of the old Georgian churches to be built with great walls around them out of fear from the northern invaders and also out of fear of imperial powers like the Persians and the Turks. Journalists and political analysts around the world commonly refer to the people of Chechnya as terrorists, and they have certainly terrorized the Georgians. Chechens, in fact, have actually had very little contact with Georgians in the past two centuries, yet because of the history of terror and violence these neighbors remain antagonistic.

Yet, according to Daniel Buttry, the Baptists in Georgia heard Christ’s call to love these historic enemies, these terrorists, and so they went to the mountains where the Chechen refugees were trying to survive in hiding from the Russian Army because of a brutal war that was taking place in their homeland that resulted in the destruction of their capital city of Grozny.42 Georgian Baptists went into the mountains and provided for the Chechen "terrorists" basic needs, and they labored with their enemies who had become a forgotten people amid the rugged terrain of the Caucasian mountains for two long years. Georgian Baptists went with Romans 12:20 as a conviction on their hearts to go to the Chechens responded to the words “if your enemies are hungry, feed them,” with a mobile Eucharistic table that was open wide enough to transcend the boundaries of religion and ethnicity to engage in table fellowship with those who were their enemies. Moved by this act of hospitality one Muslim imam remarked, “When I return to Grozny I will do two things. I will build a new mosque because ours was destroyed by the Russians, and I will build a Baptist church because the Baptists were the only people with us in our time of need.”43

Georgian Baptists’ radical action of love for their enemies has “broken down the dividing wall” between Muslims and Christians in Georgia to the extent that when Baptist Bishop Malkhaz Songulashvili was imprisoned in Belarus, Georgian Muslims joined the EBCG in protesting his arrest. As Malkhaz explains, “In order to be consistent with the teachings of

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4 Buttry, p.3.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
Jesus, which we believe are still very relevant, we had to seek peace and reconciliation when enemies were defeated. We had to do it unconditionally like Jesus did. Jesus was the first to show that greater achievements can only be made by non-violent actions. Violence produces violence, bloodshed leads to bloodshed."  