

## Book Reviews

*The Doukhobors*, by George Woodcock and Ivan Avakumovic. Toronto and New York: Oxford University Press. 1968. 382 pp. \$7.50.

The name "Doukhobor," like that of many other derogatory terms for dissenters, was coined by opponents of the group. It means "Spirit Wrestlers" and was intended by Archbishop Serebrennikov, when he coined it in 1785, to suggest that the dissenters from the Orthodox Church were fighting against the Holy Ghost. In adopting it, the Doukhobor subtly changed its connotation, claiming that they fought with (not against) the spirit of God, which they believed to dwell within them (page 19). The Doukhobors rejected the mediatory priesthood, the new Nikon (late 17th century) translation of the Bible. In some respects they resemble the Anabaptist dissenters of Western Christianity. However, they acknowledge no sacraments, and in their denial of liturgy, ikons, fasts, festival, priests, and churches, they also rejected baptism and the doctrine of redemption that is so central to the Christian churches. The only visible symbols of their faith, according to the authors, are the loaf of bread, the cellar of salt, and the jug of water that stand on the table in the middle of their meetinghouse, symbolizing the basic elements of existence.

The authors are well qualified. George Woodcock of the English Department of the University of British Columbia is an accomplished writer, biographer, poet, travel writer, and editor of *Canadian Literature*. Ivan Avakumovic is professor of political science at the same institution and has written a book on the history of the Communist party in Yugoslavia. The first impression that struck this reviewer is the clarity of the writing. This is augmented by a fine grasp of all the languages required to exhaust the original sources. These two qualities pervade the entire treatment. The authors tell the whole story and tell it well, from the origins in Russia through exile, migration to Canada, strife, protest, division,

acculturation, and the present status of the society in both Canada and Russia.

Able treatments on the subject in the English language are limited and the better ones are out of date. The most important sociological work is Harry B. Hawthorn's *The Doukhobors of British Columbia* (1955) which grew out of the provincial government's effort towards an objective study. From the viewpoint of the Doukhobors perhaps one of the best is Peter Brock's translation of *Vasya Pozdnyakov's Dukhobor Narrative* in the *Slavonic and East European Review* (June 1965). Aylmer Maude's *Life of Tolstoy* (1953 ed.) was one of the most objective treatments prior to the immigration of the group to Canada in 1899. (He acted as sponsor for the group in their dealings with the Canadian officials.) Joseph Elkinton's book, *The Doukhobors* (1903), is valuable inasmuch as he was given access to records of the Imperial Russian government. The Doukhobors, like other dissenters, have suffered much at the hands of journalists and those who write as outraged citizens. Simma Holt's book, *Terror in the Name of God* (1964), deals with the Sons of Freedom Doukhobors and is on many points (including theology) on unsound ground. Russian sources, which are closed to many Western scholars, acknowledge the ethnographer and historian, Bonch Bruyevicy (1873-1955), as having made a profound contribution to Doukhobor studies.

The integrating principle in Doukhobor life has features common to other persecuted minorities, but there are differences as documented by the authors. In spite of their rejection of the Bible, the Doukhobors appear to follow out literally a body of ethnical teachings in a manner akin to that of the early Christians. This reasonable side of Doukhorism, say the authors, led Tolstoy into the error of believing that he had discovered a group of peasants who, without the advantages of book learning, had evolved a system of thought very similar to his own. They are pacifist, for example, and have no church organization. The *sobranya* or coming-togetherness in festive occasions, where all ages enter into long periods of choral singing, lies at the heart of the integrating principle. It is God's will, not man's nor the majority of men, which is expected to influence decision-making. The desired unanimity in community depends upon each person giving up his own individuality so that the God within him may merge with the God in others. The effectiveness of the *sobranya* lies not in preaching, nor in ritual or personal communications and prayer, but in a settling-down into the past, an immersion of the self into the group, in monotonous persistent singing. This "vocal magic" ties

the individual to the structural unity of the group. The psalms and hymns are an authentic expression of the Doukhobor people, their beliefs, and history recorded by anonymous folk bards and "welded into tradition by the very method of oral transmission that rendered written religious literature unnecessary to a peasant people living in a rural society where literacy was rare." "The Living Book" of psalms and hymns is constantly growing and changing according to the experiences of the sect — in contrast to the Bible which to them represents the frozen wisdom of the past. In Doukhobor thought, Christ was one of many manifestations of deity. There are many Christs on earth and among them are the Doukhobor leaders. The succession is not by reincarnation but by both charisma and the hereditary line of the divine leaders. Dreams and prophecies are valued. There is special merit in the irrational and the spontaneous act.

The attempt of the provincial school authorities to integrate the young into Canadian society by taking the children from the parents and placing them in boarding schools illustrates many psychological processes. Forced integration can have many strange consequences. The large contiguous blocks of land which the government sold to the Doukhobors on time payments added great difficulty to overall assimilation. Geographic insularity was assured to a far greater extent than with Hutterites who are allowed only several thousand acres per colony.

The origins of the Doukhobor religion remain obscure and, according to the authors, "can be answered, at best, with enlightened conjecture." The commonly held belief that they derive from the Old Believers who resisted Nikon's reforms and were divided over such liturgical questions as whether two or three fingers should be used in making the sign of the cross or how many times Alleluia should be sung during a service, has many problems. The Old Believers never attacked the basic doctrines of the church and of redemption but like the Old Order Amish of today were defenders of an old way of life.

The authors are to be congratulated on completing a very difficult research task that preceded the writing of the book. They have enlightened modern readers about a people who have too long been obscure.

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