Religion, State & Society, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2000

Molokans and Dukhobors: Living Sources of Russian Protestantism

ROMAN LUNKIN & ANTON PROKOF'YEV

The Molokans and Dukhobors, like the Old Believers, comprise a traditional Russian Christian movement that adheres strongly to its religious traditions and way of life. Like the Old Believers, this movement emerged in the seventeenth century. The Old Believers, such as for example those who belong to the Belokrinita Concord, are attempting to react to the challenges of modern life and are adapting their faith to some extent in response to these challenges. The Molokans and Dukhobors, by contrast, are the only religious groups which have decided to preserve their traditions and remain unaffected by modern life, despite the changes and chances of history, the closed nature of their communities and repression by the Soviet authorities, which effectively left them leaderless. Like the Old Believers, they have zealously preserved a number of old traditions. Even today in many communities they wear traditional Russian dress and have preserved the old forms of singing the psalms. They attach a great deal of importance to maintaining the old way of life even in the context of a modern village.

The Molokans and Dukhobors could be formally categorised as sects, in the sense of a discrete religious group that has firmly cut itself off from society, but their teachings are fundamentally similar to those of the Russian Baptists and Evangelicals. The Protestant character of the Molokan and Dukhobor ideology was mainly defined by their opposition to the official Orthodox Church. While the Old Believers expressed their opposition by seeking to preserve the liturgy in its unchanged form, the Molokans and Dukhobors returned to the Bible. Molokans had elders (*presvitery*) and the Dukhobors had leaders (*vozhdi*). In their desire to maintain an absolute purity of faith, the Dukhobors eventually went as far as denying the authority of the Bible itself.

The Molokans and Dukhobors have the same origin: they developed out of a proto-Protestant religious protest movement against the official Church, which emerged during the reforms of Patriarch Nikon (1642–48). At the end of the seventeenth century this movement split into Molokans and Dukhobors. As soon as these movements appeared they were persecuted by the spiritual and secular authorities, which forced them to be secretive and conspiratorial about their beliefs: as well as meeting secretly for worship, they would still take communion in Orthodox churches from time to time and bury their dead according to Orthodox rites. Thus persecution of these sects was sporadic in nature. This was reflected in their own accounts, where the main persecutors featured tended as a rule to be parish priests and low-ranking police officers.

ISSN 0963-7494 print; 1465-3974 online/00/010085-08

Molokans and Dukhobors share many beliefs and practices. They reject the sacraments, including Baptism; they refuse to revere the Cross; they have a unique style of singing during worship. They were given their names by their Orthodox opponents. The Molokans gained theirs from their practice of drinking milk on Orthodox fast days; and the Dukhobors were described as such by Archbishop Amvrosi of Yekaterinoslav who in 1785 wrote about them as 'wrestling with the spirit' because they did not worship the Holy Trinity and the Holy Spirit in a fitting manner.

Molokans and Dukhobors are distinguished more by their differing original social composition than by theological differences.

The Molokans were traditionally peasants who preserved their own particular village community mentality, maintaining a system of elders rather than establishing a single leader. Molokan peasants had no use for a complicated concept of liturgy. It came naturally to them to follow Biblical precepts to the letter, to accept the Bible unquestioningly and to form themselves into autonomous groups. Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures is still the main sign of holiness among the Molokans. Like the Dukhobors, the Molokans see no need for the sacrament of Baptism; they speak instead of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which is described in the Bible. Molokan beliefs are more collectivist in nature than Dukhobor beliefs, although they do not preach collective salvation. Collective prayers (following texts taken from the Bible only) and preaching on the Scriptures by the elders play a significant part in the life of the Molokan community.

The intellectual elite of the proto-Protestant movement, people from the service class who had some degree of education, tended to belong to the Dukhobors. The Dukhobors were therefore able to develop a degree of theological understanding of their beliefs. They also developed a distinctive Dukhobor mentality. They established an institution of leaders with unquestioned authority, known as 'Christs' (*'Khristy'*), 'nourishers' (*'kormil'tsy'*), 'godbearers' (*'bogoroditsy'*): their consciousness is typically one of a working commune rather than a religious community.

While the Molokans are evasive about defining their beliefs, the Dukhobors have developed a detailed formulation of their faith. They reject the Bible as the work of man which, in the words of Polina Kalmykova, a contemporary Dukhobor, has been distorted by 'priests who added and changed a lot of things to suit their own ends'. Instead, by the nineteenth century, they had already developed their own canon, the *Book of Life* (*Zhivotnaya kniga*), a collection of psalms and 'verses' (*'stishki'*) containing the whole of their teaching. Until the beginning of this century this book existed only in oral form, but then it was published by the famous Bolshevik activist and contemporary of Lenin V. D. Bonch-Bruyevich, who before the Revolution had been a well-known expert on the Dukhobors.

The Dukhobors recognise the Trinity but understand it in allegorical terms. The Holy Trinity is represented by Light, Life and Peace. These are not three persons, as in traditional theology, but three symbols. They believe that God is present in the human being in the form of Memory, Reason and Will. Thus the idea of 'church' is acceptable to them only when understood as meaning a person's soul, which inasmuch as it consists of these three elements resembles God. Dukhobor theology includes elements of pantheism. They believe that God is manifest in the whole of Creation and that man is His temple. Dukhobors attach primary importance to a personal faith and relationship between God and the individual. Every person is considered a saint, a Son of God. Prayer is possible only as a dialogue between the individual and God because the Dukhobors have neither churches nor ritual. The Dukhobors maintain that baptism is the entire life of an individual. They see

weddings and funerals more as traditional rites of passage than as sacraments. The extreme individualism of Dukhobor beliefs rule out the very idea of a church hierarchy, which is a vanity of this world. In contrast with mainstream Protestant beliefs, the Dukhobors do not believe Jesus Christ to be God and instead call him the 'Envoy of Higher Reason' (*'Poslannik Vysshego Razuma'*), a prophet and the first leader of the 'True Christians' (*'Istinnyye Khristiane'*), which is what the Dukhobors call themselves. Those of their leaders who are called 'Christs' are believed by Dukhobor communities to be in the image and likeness of God, endowed with His special blessing. The 'Christ' apparently used to enjoy all the privileges of a typical feudal leader of a medieval sect whose spiritual authority was unquestioned. The Dukhobors always strove to create a single organisation with a leader acknowledged by all. They thus displayed a unique combination of extreme religious individualism and strong centralised leadership – elements that might hardly be expected to reinforce each other.

At first both Molokans and Dukhobors asserted that their own path to salvation was the only true one; but today both respect the importance of the individual's right to choose, regardless of his religious confession.

Molokans and Dukhobors have always attached great importance to serving the community; this is seen as a sacred duty. From the very start Molokan and Dukhobor leaders would live in an orphanage. The first of these was situated in the village of Goreloye in Tambov *oblast'*. The orphanage was the focus of the religious life of these proto-Protestant communities: the leader, known as the 'nourisher' (*'kormilets'*) or 'wise man' (*'muzh mudry'*), lived there; orphans, the poor and the elderly who had no relatives were looked after and communal stores of provisions were kept there. To this day Molokans and Dukhobors consider this system of social provision to be one of the main characteristics that distinguishes them from the Orthodox population. They are keen to emphasise that 'no orphan is left without shelter and bread'. The orphanage has also always been a centre for worship, where the community members gather for prayer and Bible reading and to sing psalms they have composed and chants compiled from a wide range of sources, from the Psalter to the works of the Orthodox theologian St Dimitri Rostovsky. One of the features of their peasant way of life which the Molokans and Dukhobors most value is that of mutual assistance. If someone in the community needs help with any task, others will always offer their assistance without payment.

The Molokans and Dukhobors saw themselves as true Christians and were from the very start more conscious of their religious distinctiveness than of any ethnic identity. They did not therefore think of themselves as Russians. In a country where the main Church was tied in with state power they themselves were not prepared to accept state authority. For its part the state accepted the presence of the sects but drove them out to what were effectively reservations in the Caucasus. They were the only Russians in the region. This fact led to a change in their self-identification and to the gradual emergence of an ethnic Russian consciousness amongst them; and yet at the same time it reinforced their beliefs and sense of distinctiveness. Today Molokans and Dukhobors no longer see themselves as a distinct ethno-religious group but call themselves Russian patriots.

During the time when the Imperial Russian authorities were persecuting dissenters Molokans and Dukhobors experienced developments similar to those that took place in American Protestantism. In the same way as the Pentecostals split from the Methodists, so the Molokans divided into two separate movements, because of differences in their interpretation of the Bible and their understanding of the way to

God. Those who followed the Molokan leader Semen Uklein, known as the 'Constant Molokans' (*'Postoyannyye Molokane'*), continued to adhere to their traditional concept of salvation, while the 'Maksimists', followers of a new ideologue, Maksim Rudometkin, who was originally a member of the Khlysty, held that the baptism of the Holy Spirit was essential, accepted the absolute authority of personal revelation and practised glossolalia; they resembled today's charismatics.

The Dukhobors meanwhile were transforming and developing their teachings under leaders from the Kalmykov–Kapustin dynasty. Each successive leader would introduce something new. The tradition of 'leadership' (*'vozhdizm'*) among the Russian Dukhobors ended with the death of the last member of that dynasty, Luker'ya Kalmykova. There followed a schism between those who acknowledged the new leader, her brother Petr Verigin, who began his leadership with the now traditional reform of Dukhobor teaching (the so-called 'large half' (*'bol'shaya polovina'*)), and those who rejected Verigin's legitimacy and the concept of 'leader' itself and who wanted to revive the old traditions (the 'small half' (*'malaya polovina'*)). Thus the original freedom and individualism of the Dukhobor movement came into conflict with the idea of a strong leadership. The 'large half' preached total pacifism, refused to perform military service and burnt their weapons, which brought them into conflict with the authorities. When the repressive machinery of the Russian Empire started to turn on the Dukhobors they were defended by the writer Lev Tolstoy, whose support helped to put a stop to the repressions and gave them the opportunity to emigrate to Canada. Tolstoy's personal secretaries accompanied the Dukhobors on their journey to a new way of life. The 'small half' stayed in Russia, but their teaching, which until recently had been constantly modified by the 'Christs', was no longer able to evolve; the Dukhobors thus had no means of reviewing their beliefs to meet the demands of more modern times.

The social changes of the early twentieth century had a significant impact on the Molokan and Dukhobor communities. Whole Molokan communities joined Baptist and Evangelical churches because of similarities in their beliefs and they often became the backbone of these churches. The Dukhobors were more seriously affected by social change. They gradually began to forget their traditions and teachings. The reason for this was that there was no doctrinal authority or written text setting out their beliefs. Their *Book of Life*, which was merely a collection of psalms and verses, could not possibly fulfil this role. The community had played a key role in the preservation of their beliefs, but neither Molokans nor Dukhobors were able to develop any immunity to the influences of urban life; they had neither the organisational forms nor theological grounding for life in an urban setting, which differed so greatly from that of a village.

The Molokans and Dukhobors were dealt a further devastating blow by the policies of the Soviet authorities, aimed at destroying their village communities, not only as farming collectives but also as religious communities. Atheist propaganda conducted through the compulsory education system had a similar effect. The most active, reflective and creative members of the communities were repressed, with the result that both Molokans and Dukhobors were left effectively leaderless. Their traditional upbringing could not withstand the propaganda taught in Soviet schools; thus it was the young who first began to lose their traditions, and this process was reinforced from one generation to the next. The Dukhobors were particularly affected, as the younger generation has practically no knowledge of their traditions. Molokan elders, who still had some influence over the young, were able to counteract the

effect of these external pressures to some extent, but Molokan communities today are still in a poor state nevertheless. The absence of a preaching tradition among both the Molokans and the Dukhobors and their insistence on the individual path to God and individual choice has led to an almost complete loss of the younger generation. The erosion of their traditional way of life and social structures has been one of the main factors in the decline in religious observance in their communities.

After the collapse of the USSR the Molokans and Dukhobors found themselves in a unique situation. Complete freedom of religion should have facilitated the renewal of the Molokan and Dukhobor faiths; however the fact that their leaders were unprepared and that there were no organisational structures in place meant that in their initial attempts to organise themselves both movements fell victim to unscrupulous individuals. The main reason for this was a lack of organisation and accountability in the management of community finances, which led to some very sad consequences for both communities.

At the same time the new-found freedom of religion coincided with a sharp rise in ethnic tensions in the Caucasus, and the Molokan and Dukhobor communities began to experience some pressure from local authorities with nationalist programmes, which led to their migration to Russia. One should note, however, that relations between the native population of the Caucasus and the Molokans and Dukhobors have remained as harmonious as before.

The new conditions of religious freedom did encourage the Molokans and Dukhobors to reorganise themselves and try to build up their faith. They have been uprooted from their traditional village communities and have moved to the southern regions of Russia. Again they faced the problem of adapting to city life. This was perhaps more difficult for the Dukhobors than for the Molokans. In fact, the Dukhobors are the only migrants who have succeeded in establishing a compact community of their own, in Tula *oblast'*. The Molokans and Dukhobors are seeking to reestablish their closed, self-sufficient way of life, which had in the past guaranteed their survival, because of the destruction of their communities and their inability to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances: this, however, has led to a further decline with the result that there are practically no young people left in their communities. It is only recently that some Molokan communities have begun to establish a small number of Sunday Schools. Some Molokan elders, brought up in the old traditions and unable to come to terms with the new realities of life, opposed this development because they believed that their faith should be taught in the old ways. The Dukhobors have also begun to open schools; this has caused no controversy among them.

The Molokans and Dukhobors are going to achieve success in missionary work only if they can coordinate the efforts of their scattered communities. However, attempts to do so in the period since *perestroika* have ended in failure because of the enduring self-sufficient peasant psychology of the communities.

Among the Dukhobors the initiative to form an organisation came from a group of believers from Rostov *oblast'*, represented by a certain Yuri Kryzhanovsky. The informal leader of the Dukhobors at that time was in fact Vasili Mikhailovich Chutskov, who had links with Canadian Dukhobors. Chutskov and the current head of the Dukhobors, Aleksei Mikhailovich Kinyakin, supported Kryzhanovsky's initiative. In July 1991 Kryzhanovsky opened the Second Congress of Russian Dukhobors, which according to some participants was more reminiscent of a Communist Party meeting than a gathering of religious communities. Representatives from local government and federal ministers spoke at the congress. There

was no discussion of specific issues relating to the Dukhobors. The only achievement of the congress was the election, on the initiative of Kinyakin and Chutskov, of a Council of Dukhobors made up of 15 of the most respected Dukhobor leaders. Kryzhanovsky was not one of them. An executive committee to oversee the resettlement of Dukhobors was also formed, but it failed to achieve much. At the same time Kryzhanovsky, who had promoted himself to the status of 'Honorary President' of the Council, received credits of 9 million roubles and donations from Canadian Dukhobors. According to the current leaders of the Dukhobors, this money was not used to meet the needs of Dukhobor settlers. When the Dukhobor leaders learned of this, they sent Kryzhanovsky an angry letter, but no reply was forthcoming. Later on, in order to escape criminal proceedings, Kryzhanovsky returned some of the money he had received to the state, but by then it was devalued by inflation. In March–April 1992 the Dukhobors called a special congress in Arkhangel'skoye in Tula *oblast'*, which had become their main area of resettlement, and dismissed Kryzhanovsky. This congress was much more representative of the community than the previous one had been: it reformed the leadership of the Dukhobors and put in place the structures that exist today. However, Kryzhanovsky tried to convene a rival congress in Pyatigorsk. The Dukhobors decided to regard this as simply a gathering of his own comrades. Kryzhanovsky's contacts with the Dukhobors ended at this point. (He subsequently sought to play a leadership role in various different confessions; when he died he was a Krishnaite.) The Dukhobors were then successful in obtaining state funding for the construction of an entire village for Dukhobor settlers in Arkhangel'skoye, which is the only one of its kind in Russia.

The Molokan leaders recognised the dangers presented by the various movements that had begun to emerge within their community and therefore began to organise centralised leadership structures and establish formal relations with the state authorities, which they had never done before. In 1990 the elder of the recently-formed Moscow congregation, Ivan Aleksandrov, revived the Molokan journal *Dukhovny khristianin* and began to prepare for a founding congress of Molokans for the following year. Regional unions of congregations, or committees of Molokan Christians led by an elder or chairman, began to form in various parts of the country. The organising committee of the founding congress began to publish a newsletter, *Vest'*, giving details of preparations for the congress. Shortly before the congress an association was formed called Community (*Obshchina*), which had the task of helping to revive the economic fortunes of the Molokan communities. The founding congress took place in June 1991: delegates from 60 congregations attended but in fact only 40 congregations joined the Union of Molokan Christian Communities (*Soyuz obshchin dukhovnykh khristian-molokan*). The Union was open to Maksimists as well as Constant Molokans but none of the former in fact joined. Aleksandrov was chosen as the senior elder. The main tasks of the Union were to deal wit the migration issue and to seek funds. The Community association was disbanded as nothing had come of its task of uniting Molokan state and collective farms. Aleksandrov suggested to the elders that they should start up some kind of economic activity to support the communities, but this caused disagreements. For many Molokan elders the fear of being perceived as mercenary was stronger than the obvious need to set up an economically healthy organisation. This controversy continues today. The Molokans then decided to entrust Aleksandrov with all material and financial matters, but according to the current head of the Moscow community, Yakov Yevdokimov, he immediately fell under suspicion of misusing donations received from Molokans in

the USA. At the same time, many Molokan communities could not accept Aleksandrov as the formal leader of a unified organisation as the concept of a single leader in many ways contradicts Molokan tradition. In autumn 1991 Aleksandrov resigned as an elder and instead devoted himself fully to administrative work for the Union.

In 1993 the Union effectively broke up. Two congresses were held, one in the village of Kochubeyevka in Stavropol' *raion* organised by the supporters of the local elder, Timofei Shchetinkin, and one in Moscow organised by Aleksandrov's supporters. Aleksandrov received no support from the regional communities and in 1994 his active involvement effectively came to an end. At present his successors to the leadership of the Moscow community want to start criminal proceedings against him for the misuse of funds. Although the Union has been registered on two separate occasions – in 1994 and 1999 – there is no longer any unity among the Molokans. The last congress took place in Tambov in August 1997, convened by local Molokan elders. It was, to all intents and purposes, ignored by those communities that supported Shchetinkin and had no influence at all. The only serious issue discussed by the congress was the religious education of the young.

With their collectivist tendencies, the Molokans have nevertheless succeeded in forming reasonably strong regional unions. Despite all the problems and misfortunes, the Molokans and Dukhobors have succeeded in preserving their unique identity and have not become assimilated into the general Russian population, nor have they been absorbed into one of the numerous Protestant denominations. The Molokans have been more inclined towards formal unity because of their traditionally collectivist leanings. Their leaders have already realised the need to attract the young and abandon some of their more outmoded customs, such as the ritual wearing of traditional dress at prayer meetings and the various rules and restrictions in daily life, while preserving the purity of their core beliefs. In fact the Molokans are currently reliving the experience of their predecessors at the beginning of the century, who gradually developed a more open form of evangelism without compromising their particular Molokan identity. The Dukhobors, by contrast, are placing more and more emphasis on individual religious experience and are gradually turning away from the practice of a communal prayer life. An undefined theology and the absence of leadership have led to the collapse of all centralised Dukhobor organisations: it was simply impossible to justify their existence. Unity among the Dukhobors is maintained only by the memory of their common origin and by their tendency to live in compact settlements.

Recent interest in the Molokans and Dukhobors, from an ethnographer's perspective, may gradually increase as Russian Protestants begin to seek out their roots in traditional Russian beliefs. It was the Molokans who prepared the ground for modern Russian Evangelicals and Baptists. In society as a whole it is becoming more important for people to understand a whole range of traditional perceptions of God and of human life. In the religious practices of the Molokans and Dukhobors there is much that is patriarchal and outmoded, stemming from the traditional way of life of village communities, but their actual teachings have many similarities with contemporary Russian Protestantism. They have remained open to the needs of society and their active social work among orphans, the poor and the elderly has played a huge role in the preservation of the Molokan and Dukhobor movements. The Molokans and Dukhobors have maintained a strikingly unique and simple faith, as a result, says the Dukhobor leader Aleksei Kinyakin, of their traditional life-affirming Russian peasant consciousness, which despite all the changes in their circumstances they have

preserved to this day. However, their future will depend on how successful they are in adapting their traditional way of life, with its rural origins, to a contemporary urban existence.

(Translated from the Russian by Suzanne Pattle)