

Book Review

The Spirit-Wrestlers: A Russian Journey, by Philip Marsden. London: Harper Collins, 1998. 250 pp., £17.99.

It is fitting that this review should appear in the issue of *Religion, State and Society* devoted to the forthcoming encyclopaedia of religion in Russia. Philip Marsden's book adds something to what is already (in the unpublished materials of Keston's project) a fascinating panorama. One could not reasonably expect such a formal volume as the encyclopaedia will be (assuming it finds an English-speaking publisher) to have the human touches contained in a travelogue, of which this is an example, but a superior one.

The Spirit-Wrestlers (a translation of the name of the Dukhobors, a dissident sect of tsarist times) is an account of Philip Marsden's extensive travels in the south of Russia and the Caucasus. Written well and with a light touch, it adds to one's knowledge of a complicated and dangerous region. As there is no index and the chapter headings give little away, this book does not fulfil its potential in adding to the fount of knowledge and must be read as a personal account, rather than as a source for serious study.

The cumulative effect is considerable, adding further proof to the contention (which will be a key point of the encyclopaedia) that the collapse of communism has led to an inundation of every conceivable type of religious practice. It may be true that the legislation of 1997 was intended to control the influx of foreign missionaries and their activities, but, as this book makes plain, much more important is the revival of indigenous Russian sectarianism.

Marsden's observations, therefore, could almost have been written in the nineteenth century. Traces of communism are everywhere, yet wherever he travels the past has resurfaced: Old Believers, Dukhobors, Molokans ('Milk-Drinkers' – a kind of Protestant sect who were thought to have been absorbed by the Baptists), Cossacks, the Muslims of Adygeia (sought rather than found), and many others. Several groups were new to me, even after two years' work (very part time) on the encyclopaedia. For example, here is what he writes about a strange Georgian sect:

'In truth, the Yezidis believe in Satan only in so far as the central figure of their belief is a fallen angel. But they call him Melek Taus, and will not utter the name Satan ... The Yezidis do not worship the devil. But they do accept in a way that distinguishes them from all other faiths of this faith-soaked region that evil is an integral part of creation.'

The concentration is on characters and many a reconstructed (over-reconstructed?) conversation. There is not that much enquiry into the formal beliefs of the gallery of characters, both weird and admirable, unveiled before us. Sometimes the conversations and questions stop just when they are beginning to be at their most interesting.

It is time for the author to move on. This may be a little annoying for the specialist, but it is fine for the pace of the book.

Perhaps one day Philip Marsden might be able to offer Keston Institute the raw material of his travel notes, for they would be a fascinating acquisition for the archive. His work proves that no one can understand Russia today without paying close attention to its ever more multifarious religious and ethnic diversity.

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