

THE BOOK OF KIN by Vladimir Megré

Book 6 of *The Ringing Cedars Series*

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John Woodsworth, translator • Dr Leonid Sharashkin, editor

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TRANSLATOR'S AFTERWORD

Suppose you've lived all your life in the same town at the base of a huge mountain. You've looked at that mountain day in and day out as you walked to and from school, ploughed your fields, shopped at the outdoor market, or cycled around the town on errands. You are familiar with every detail of its craggy surfaces, and on occasion have even climbed up part way to explore the foothills. But you have never been round to the other side.

Then one fine day you decide to take the night train to a town some distance away, about a quarter of the way around the mountain, where the local residents speak a completely different dialect from yours. Upon arriving the next morning, you set out to take a look at the mountain from this side. And there it is, looming just as large, just beyond this new town. Only at first it doesn't look like the same mountain at all, even though your angle has changed by a mere 90 degrees. What was familiar from a frontal view you now see in profile. Features you knew before in profile are now facing you head on.

Some of these features require a closer examination to identify. In fact, many of your fellow residents who made this trip before you and didn't bother to examine the scene in detail say the mountain here looks nothing at all like the one back home. Some of them refuse to believe it is the same mountain. A few even associate the unfamiliar appearance with something hostile and threatening.

Such impressions are further fuelled by the different way the locals describe the mountain in their own dialect — either with completely different words, or using the same words but with different connotations. Indeed, the terminological discrepancy is rather disconcerting at first. But little by little, the more you examine these features in detail and even try a bit of climbing exploration, the more you

become convinced that you are dealing with the same mountain you have known all your life. And as you hear local residents speaking about it, you gradually acquire the ability to translate between their dialect and yours and realise they are talking about the same concepts you have known all along.

In sum, you find yourself simply amazed at what you are learning about a familiar landmark from a brand new perspective. That does not necessarily mean, however, that you have any plans to suddenly relocate your residence. But you are certainly able to make use of your new knowledge to enhance your appreciation and exploration of the mountain from your own home base.

This little story pretty much describes my experience in approaching Vladimir Megré's *Ringling Cedars Series*. Having been raised in the Protestant denomination known as Christian Science¹ (though I am sure people of many different faiths have had a similar experience), I was amazed, even 'blown away' by the new vistas of 'Mount Spirituality' that opened up to me from my initial reading of the Series. At first glance, like the mountain in the story above, some of the features, especially those given new names or whose names were interpreted differently, presented something of a recognition challenge. But the more I read, the more I realised I was not being presented with a new God or even a new religion, but simply with new views on the same God and spirituality I had known all along, only from a different angle. And these insights have indeed enhanced my appreciation and exploration of spiritual concepts from my own faith's home base.

One particularly striking example of being 'blown away' by a new view of familiar territory was my initial reading of Chapter 1 in the present volume ("Who raises our children?"), which seems to pick up right where Mary Baker Eddy's chapter on "Marriage" in *Science and health* (pp. 56–69) leaves off. Not only that, but a friend of our family's — a Catholic writer on theology — told me of a number of instances where intimate relations have been linked to a more spiritual outlook, including certain practices among Orthodox Jews and native peoples of North America.² She also referred me to the Book of Tobit (or Tobias) in the Apocrypha for an additional illustration. These examples, however, while fascinating, differ from the approach outlined in Chapter 1 in that their attention is still concentrated on the physical act of intimacy (albeit seen from a more spiritual standpoint), while the principal focus of Megré's discussion with the psychologist is *children*, the physical conditions playing but an incidental role.³

Another group that has much in common with Anastasia's viewpoints on life are the Doukhobors — a sect that was persecuted in Tsarist Russia for their pacifism and opposition to the dictates of official church hierarchy. In 1899 they were helped to emigrate to Canada by the writer Leo Tolstoy, who recognised in them a living embodiment of his own simple, straightforward approach to a Christianity of the heart without ecclesiastical trappings.⁴

¹*Christian Science* — a Christian denomination founded in 1879 in New England by Mary Baker Eddy, designed to "reinstat primitive Christianity and its lost element of healing" (Eddy, *Manual of The Mother Church*, p. 17). Eddy's principal statement of her ideas is found in a 700-page volume entitled *Science and health with Key to the Scriptures* (Boston, 1911). As with Megré, one of Eddy's basic aims was to change the human perception of God's laws in action from one based on mysticism and the promise of future rewards to one based on reason and fact, demonstrable in our earthly experience here and now.

²For further exploration, see: Philip Sherrard, *Christianity and Eros* (London: SPCK Holy Trinity Church, 1976); Linda Sabbath, *The radiant heart* (Denville, NJ, USA: Dimension Books, 1977); Mary Shivanandan, *Natural sex* (New York: Rawson Wade, 1979).

³Compare Eddy's statement in *Science and health* (pp. 61–62): "If the propagation of a higher human species is requisite to reach this goal [of spiritual unity], then its material conditions can only be permitted for the purpose of generating."

⁴See, for example: Andrew Donskov, *Leo Tolstoy and the Canadian Doukhobors* (Ottawa: Centre for Research on Canadian-Russian Relations, 2005).

This past year I had occasion to present a conference paper entitled: “Links across space and time: the life and works of Leo Tolstoy, Mary Baker Eddy and Vladimir Megré”, pointing out some of the many similarities not only in the ideas of these three spiritual thinkers, but also in their personal and professional lives. As specific examples, the paper compares similar statements from all three writers on the subjects of *life* and *prayer*. I have no doubt that the comparison could be extended to include some other spiritual thinkers too.

Indeed, to me one of the most remarkable features of Megré's whole account of Anastasia and her sayings is its sense of *inclusiveness*. Megré does not purport to take his readers into another universe, where all the worthy values they have held dear for so long must suddenly be regarded as worthless and forsakeable in favour of some new doctrine. He is not presenting them with a ‘new mountain’. Rather, he is simply showing them the spiritual values they already have from a brand new point of view, thereby enhancing the significance of these values and helping his readers put them into practice more effectively.

As a translator, I was delighted to find that this sense of inclusiveness embraces not just people and their values, but the whole underlying foundation of *language* as well. Often seen as a divisive element in human society, in the *Ringling Cedars Series* (particularly the present book) language becomes a unifying force as fragments of its ancient roots are uncovered, enabling us to trace equivalent words in different languages back to their common origin.

At the beginning of Chapter 10, a footnote on the name *Medvedkovo* explains that *medved'*, the Russian word for the animal we call a ‘bear’, is comprised of the roots *med-* (honey) and *ved-* (know).⁵ Surprisingly, both these roots have their counterparts in English: *mead* (an alcoholic drink made from fermented honey and water) and *wit* (an obsolete word meaning ‘know’, now more commonly used in the sense of ‘quick understanding’ or the ability to play intelligently with words and their meanings).⁶ Historically, *knowledge* and *sight* were related concepts (we *see*, therefore we *know*), and hence words like *video* and *vision* can also be traced (through Latin *videre* = ‘to see’) back to this same root, as can the word *white* (something clearly seen). These examples show some of the many layers of meaning inherent in the original root.

But even more interesting, as my editor, Leonid Sharashkin, has pointed out to me, is the realisation of how these linguistic changes reflect the evolution of the underlying concepts in human consciousness: in both Russian and English the roots *ved-* and *wit-* have yielded in general usage to *zna-* and *know-*, respectively, indicating mankind's greater interest today in superficial, technological knowledge than in the multi-dimensional awareness and wisdom implied by the earlier terms. In fact, with some of their derivatives in both languages, e.g., *ved'ma* = *witch*, the original positive reference (in this case, to someone capable of harnessing the extended abilities of the human mind) has given way in popular perception to a more negative connotation (of one who uses such abilities for devious or evil purposes).

⁵On *vedat'* and its distinction from *znat'* please see footnote 8 in Chapter 5: “The history of mankind, as told by Anastasia”.

⁶The word *wit* may be familiar to readers of the Authorised (King James) Version of the Bible in its variant *wot* — see, for example, Exodus 32: 1, where the people tell Aaron they “wot not what is become of” Moses. See also Acts 3: 17, Romans 11: 2.

⁷Another interesting insight from Sanskrit is the origin of the name *Anastasia*. In Sanskrit the first letter *a-* is a negating particle (as in *asymmetrical* in English), while the root *nast-* signifies ‘deterioration’ (compare English *nasty*) — hence *anasta* = ‘without deterioration’. This also underlies the use of *anastasia* in Greek to signify ‘resurrection’. (I am grateful to my editor for pointing out this etymology.)

Like many Russian roots, *ved-* comes directly from Sanskrit (along with Latin, one of the two proto-tongues from which the whole Indo-European family of languages is derived).⁷ And this highlights another aspect of inclusiveness evident in the Series — namely, certain indications that language transcends mere human invention,⁸ hence its great potential for unifying instead of dividing the peoples of the Earth. On a visit to Russia in the 1960s, renowned Sanskritologist Durga Prasad Shastri discovered remarkable similarities between present-day Russian and the Sanskrit spoken in India some twenty-five centuries earlier. In fact, his knowledge of ancient Sanskrit enabled him to understand spoken Russian well enough that he could get by without an interpreter.⁹

And this is one more illustration of how Vladimir Megré, through relating Anastasia's sayings on mankind and its history, brings together people of not only different religions and cultures but also of different chronological periods, to recognise and embrace their common heritage as children not of different genetic backgrounds, but rather of the one universal God.

Perhaps the author's future volumes will not only show us still new views of our familiar 'mountain', but transform our whole perception of a 'mountain' into a dimension we cannot yet fathom. Think of how a mountain seen from space may resemble, let's say, a cedar nut! Then imagine how what we see as a 'mountain' of spirituality might be perceived through spiritual vision itself! The possibilities are endless.

Ottawa, Canada

John Woodsworth

December 2006

⁸See, for example, "A book of pristine origins" in Chapter 2: "Conversation with my son".

⁹See: D. P. Shastri, *Links between Russian and Sanskrit. Meerut District Conference of the Indo-Soviet Cultural Society* (Ghaziabad, 1964). Again, I thank my editor for bringing this reference to my attention.

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