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TOLSTOY'S RELIGION.

BY PRESIDENT EDWIN M. POTEAT, D.D., LL.D., GREENVILLE, S. C.

Tolstoy was born in 1828. He died in 1910. On the 22nd of February, 1901, in the seventy-third year of his life, the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Greek Church issued a decree of excommunication, in which it is said:

"In our days God has permitted a new false teacher to appear—Count Leo Tolstoy. A writer well known to the world, Russian by birth, Orthodox by baptism and education, Count Tolstoy under the seduction of his intellectual pride has insolently risen against the Lord and His Christ and against His Holy heritage, and has publicly in the sight of all men, repudiated the Orthodox Mother Church, which reared and educated him; and has devoted his literary activity and the talent given him by God, to disseminating among the people teachings repugnant to Christ and the Church and to destroying in the minds and hearts of men their national faith, the Orthodox faith. . . . Therefore the Church does not reckon him as its member, and cannot so reckon him until he repents and resumes his communion with her. . . . Many of those near to him retaining their faith, reflect with sorrow that he, at the end of his days, remains without faith in God and in our Lord and Saviour, having rejected the blessings and prayers of the Church, and all communion with her."

In his reply Tolstoy said, "That I have renounced the Church which calls itself Orthodox is perfectly correct. But I renounced it not because I had risen against the Lord, but on the contrary, only because with all the strength of my soul I wished to serve Him. Before renouncing the Church and fellowship with the people, which was inexpressibly dear to me, I—having seen some reasons to doubt the Church's integrity—devoted several years to the investigation of its theoretic and practical teachings. For the theory I read all I could about

church doctrine, and studied and critically analyzed dogmatic theology; while as to practical—for more than a year I followed strictly all the injunctions of the Church, observing all the fasts and all the services. And I became convinced that church doctrine is theoretically a crafty and harmful lie, and practically a collection of the grossest superstitions and sorcery, which completely conceals the whole of Christ's teaching. . . . 'He who begins by loving Christianity better than truth will proceed by loving his own sect or church better than Christianity, and in the end loving himself better than all', said Coleridge. I traveled the contrary way. I began by loving my Orthodox faith more than my peace; then I loved Christianity more than my Church; and now I love Truth more than anything in the world. And up to now Truth for me corresponds with Christianity, as I understand it. And I hold to this Christianity; and to the degree in which I hold to it, I live peacefully and happily, and peacefully and happily approach death."

Twelve years before his death Mr. G. H. Perris¹ wrote of him—"In naked worth, perhaps the greatest soul now alive on this earth." And when death came a leading magazine spoke of him as "the foremost man in the world of letters, a man who combined an extraordinary genius akin to madness with an extraordinary lack of common sense." A European paper speaks of him as "thought-poor"; and W. Dean Howells calls him "the greatest imaginative writer who ever lived".

The quotations here brought together set before us a strangely complex personality whose predominant characteristic was a passion for simplicity; and it will be seen at once that a study of his religion will lead us into the heart of religion itself; and will raise ultimate questions in the philosophy of the religious experience.

One takes considerable risk in attempting a generalization on Russia and Russians, but Mr. Perris, in the gripping vol-

(1) *Leo Tolstoy: A Study in Personal Evolution*, page 20.

ume already referred to says, (p.11): "Every Russian is a pilgrim....he is a foredoomed truth-seeker". And again (p.20): "This is the unknown quantity men call Russia; an immeasurable devotion, an immeasurable patience, an immeasurable industry, an immeasurable hunger for holiness. And the heart of Russia is Leo Tolstoy—a pilgrim of pilgrims, and sick with the sickness of his people".

Already in his early childhood, which he remembers as marked by "an innocent light-heartedness and an infinite need of love", he had shown an extraordinary sensitiveness to religious impressions. Of an itinerant fanatic praying in the moonlight, he exclaims²: "Oh Greesha! thou good Christian—how greatly didst thou glorify His greatness, when, unable to find any words, thou didst fall on the ground with tears". His mother, had died when he was in his third year, and his father when he was nine. His first guardian, the Countess Alexandra Osten-Saken had been "the graceful and poetic Aline with beautiful blue eyes, who used to love reading and copying French verses; who played on the harp and always had great success at the grandest balls". But after terrible experiences (Her husband became insane and tried to kill her.) she became "a truly religious woman. Her favorite occupation was reading the Lives of the Saints; communing with pilgrims, half crazy devotees, monks and nuns, of whom some always lived in our house....She was not merely outwardly religious, keeping the fasts, praying much and associating with people of saintly life, but she herself lived a truly Christian life, trying not only to avoid all luxury and acceptance of service, but herself serving others as much as possible. She never had any money for she gave away all to those who asked". His governess through all the period of his childhood, Aunt Tatiana, "took the first place in our upbringing by right of love to us, and we felt her right. I had fits of passionately tender love for her....Aunt Tatiana had the greatest influence on my life". He early fell into solitary musings and felt himself "alone in the search for the good". Writing of

(2) Maude: *Life of Tolstoy*—Vol. I: p. 24.

the period of 1840—when he was twelve or thirteen—he says: “At one time it occurred to me that happiness did not depend on outward causes, but upon the way we considered them; that a man who had grown used to suffering could never more be truly miserable, and in order to get myself inured to labor I used to hold Tatischeff’s dictionary in my outstretched hand for five minutes, or would go into a closet and scourge my bare back with a rope so severely that the tears would flow down my cheeks”.

A little later, like Shelley, he came powerfully under the illusion of the perfectibility of human nature. “At that time it seemed to us a feasible thing to improve humanity and to extirpate all human vices and sufferings; it seemed such a simple, easy thing to amend our own faults, to acquire every virtue and to be happy”. We have here a trace of what will become his gospel of salvation by loving work. There was now no God; for a boy had brought from his grammar school a year before the announcement of the latest discovery. “The discovery was that there is no God, and that all we were taught about Him is a mere invention. I remember how interested my elder brothers were in this news, they called me to their council and we all, I remember, became animated and accepted the news as something very interesting and fully possible”.

When he passed from these home influences at the age of fifteen to the University at Kazan, he entered upon a stretch of unhappy years. He had read the Sermon on the Mount; Old Testament stories; Rousseau’s Confession, and David Copperfield, beside all the popular Russian writers. Of Rousseau, he says³: “I was more than enthusiastic about him, I worshipped him. At the age of fifteen I wore a medallion portrait of him next my body instead of the Orthodox cross”. “The religious beliefs of my childhood disappeared . . . and as from the time I was fifteen I began to read philosophic works, my rejection of those beliefs very soon became a conscious one. From the age of sixteen I ceased going to church and fasting on my own accord. Looking back on that time now I clearly

(3) Maude: Vol. I: p. 46.

see that my faith—my only real faith— was a belief in perfecting oneself”. Again ⁴: “I remember also at the University that when my elder brother suddenly in the passionate way natural to him, devoted himself to religion and began to attend all the church services, and to fast and to lead a pure and moral life, we all, and even our elders, unceasingly held him to ridicule, and called him ‘Noah’ ”.

He left the University without a degree, and while there and afterward he followed the open road into all the vices of the fashionable society in which he moved. Let him tell the story of the next ten years in his own swift way. “I killed men in war; I lost at cards; wasted my substance wrung from my peasants; punished the latter cruelly; rioted with loose women, and deceived men; lying, robbery, adultery of all kinds; drunkenness, violence, and murder, I committed them all; and yet I was none the less considered by my equals as a comparatively moral man.

During that time I began to write, out of vanity, love of gain, and pride”.

But he had his qualms of conscience, flushes of repentance and at times he fell into deep self-loathing on account of his lapses. A companion describes him ⁵: “He would vanish for one, two or three days. . . . At last he would return—the very picture of a prodigal son, sombre, worn-out and dissatisfied with himself. . . . Then he would take me aside, quite apart, and would begin his confessions. He would tell me all, how he had caroused, gambled, and where he had spent his days and nights, and all the time, if you will believe me, he would condemn himself and suffer as though he were a real criminal. He was so distressed that it was pitiful to see him”.

After one of these fits of depression, in his twenty-seventh year, he writes ⁶: “A conversation about Divinity and Faith has suggested to me a great, a stupendous idea, to the realization of which I feel myself capable of devoting my life. This

(4) My Confession.

(5) Maude: Vol. I: p. 127.

(6) Ibid: p. 130.

idea is the founding of a new religion corresponding to the present state of mankind; the religion of Christianity, but purged of dogmas and mysticism; a practical religion, not promising future bliss, but giving bliss on earth. I understand that to accomplish this the conscious labor of generations will be needed. One generation will bequeath the idea to another, and some day fanaticism or reason will accomplish it. *Deliberately* to promote the union of mankind by religion—that is the basic thought, which I hope will dominate me”.

Already he had won distinction as a writer, and that same year (1855) he will publish *Sevastapol*. The next year he leaves the army and begins the career of a man of letters, and what with writing, travel, work for peasant schools at Yasnaya, association with literary men, Tourgèneff and others, the years until his marriage in 1862 are very full. It was in 1860 that he visited the Wartburg, where Luther was imprisoned after the Diet of Worms, and when shown the room where Luther commenced his translation of the Bible he exclaimed, “Luther was great!”

September 20, 1860, his favorite brother, Nicolas Tolstoy died, “literally in my arms”. And on October 13th he notes in his Diary: “At the very time of the funeral the thought occurred to me to write a Materialist Gospel, a Life of Christ as a Materialist”.⁷ “To whom can one pray? . . . A God whom one can beseech and whom one can serve—is the expression of mental weakness. . . . Indeed He is not a Being but a law and a force”.⁸

Yet his earlier religious impressions were never completely effaced, and out of the midst of his most reckless days he writes to his aunt: ⁹ “Religion and the experience I have of life (however small it may be) have taught me that life is a trial. In my case it is more than a trial; it is an expiation of my faults. . . . It is the hand of God that has guided me—I do not cease to thank Him for it”.

(7) It may not be generally known that such a *Life of Christ* was written by Thomas Cooper, president of S. C. College, 1820-34.

(8) *Ibid.*: p. 83.

(9) Maude: Vol. I: p. 73.

Or this from his Diary: ¹⁰ "He whose aim is his own happiness is bad; he whose aim is the good opinion of others is weak; he whose aim is the happiness of others is virtuous; he whose aim is God is great". And once more: ¹¹ "All the prayers I have invented I replace by one prayer—'Our Father'. All the requests I can make to God are far more loftily expressed and more worthily of Him in the words, 'Thy Kingdom Come, as in Heaven, so on earth!'" And still again: "Lord I thank Thee for Thy continual protection. How surely Thou leadest me to what is good. What an insignificant creature should I be, if Thou abandoned me. Lord, give me what is necessary, not for the satisfaction of my poor aspirations, but that I may attain to the eternal, vast, unknown aim of existence, which lies beyond my ken".¹² As showing how nearly he approached evangelical ideas, the following words, in which he is expressing his horror of war and the insufficiency of bandages to mitigate it, may be quoted:¹³ "It is not the suffering and mutilation and death of man's body that most needs to be diminished—but it is the mutilation and death of his soul. Not the *Red Cross* is needed, but the simple Cross of Christ to destroy falsehood and deception". Indeed, from his earliest years he showed affinity for the Christian ideal of humility, meekness and self-sacrifice, and this affinity was more pronounced after he had read Greek Literature (1870), which presents an outlook on life so different from his own.

But the great crisis, his "spiritual rebirth" as he calls it, is not reached till 1878—his fiftieth year. Meantime he is reading widely—Bacon, Luther, Froebel, Proudhon, Schopenhauer, the Lives of the Saints, Pascal, Kant, etc., etc. Of Schopenhauer, he says: ¹⁴ "Do you know what this summer has been for me? An unceasing ecstasy over Schopenhauer, and a series of mental enjoyments such as I never experienced before. I have bought all of his works and have read and am reading

(10) *Ibid* I: p. 91.

(11) *Ibid* I: p. 117.

(12) *Ibid*: Vol. I: p. 136.

(13) *Ibid*: Vol. I: p. 315.

(14) *Maude*: Vol. I: p. 342.

them (as well as Kant's). I do not know whether I shall ever change my opinion, but at present I am confident that Schopenhauer is the greatest genius among men".

Thus interest in literature and philosophy, his writing, the cares of a family and a large estate, absorbed him for fifteen years, and by these means he succeeded in stifling in his soul "all questions as to the meaning of my (his) own life, or of life in general".

Up to this point his life might be summarized in the words of the preacher (Ec.2): "I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure; and, behold, this also was vanity. . . . I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vinyards; I made me gardens and parks and I planted trees in them of all kinds of fruit. . . . I bought men-servants and maidens. . . . also I had great possessions of herds and flocks. . . . I gathered me also silver and gold. . . . and whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them; I withheld not from my heart any joy. . . . Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought and on all the labor that I had labored to do; and, behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was no profit under the sun".

That he is approaching Koheleth's conclusion—all is vanity—see a letter bearing date January 30, 1872:¹⁵ "In Nirvana there is nothing to laugh at; still less is there cause for anger. We all (I at least) feel that it is much more interesting than life; but I agree that however much I may think about it I can think of nothing less than that Nirvana is Nothingness. I only stand up for one thing: religious reverence—awe of that Nirvana".

And after expressing approval of the burial of his brother's child in spite of his repugnance toward ceremonial rites, he goes on—"For me at least those Slavonic words evoke quite the same metaphysical ecstasy as one experiences when one thinks of Nirvana. Religion is wonderful in that she has for so many ages rendered to so many millions of people the same

(15) Maude: Vol. I: p. 370.

service, the greatest anything human can render in this matter. With such a task how can she be logical? Yes, there is something in her”.

In 1875 a priest Vasili Ivanovitch, who had come to the house to teach the children was detained over night by a snow-storm, and “the count began a conversation with him, and they did not go to bed till daylight. . . . From that day Leo Nikolaievitch became very thoughtful, and always talked with Vasili Ivanovitch. When Lent came round the Count got up one morning and said: ‘I am going to do my devotions, and prepare to receive communion’ . . . From that day, for a couple of years, he always went to church, seldom missing a Sunday. The whole village was surprised and asked, ‘What has the Priest told the Count, that has suddenly made him so fond of church going?’ ”

He was in the thick of the five years’ inner struggle which culminated in his writing “*My Confession*” (1878). It is impossible in this article to give even the briefest summary of this remarkable human document. The pen that wrote it was dipped in blood, and the leaves are wet with tears. It is plain, grave, ruthless; with sad lucidity it uncovers the refuge of lies in which worldly people hide, and calls them out to endure the convicting gaze of Truth. It recounts the bewildered groping of a lost soul; the feeding on ashes; the pining hunger; the despair—“Lord, have mercy, save me! Lord teach me!” But no one had mercy on me, and I felt that my life was coming to a standstill”.

He sought help of the philosophers—“Where philosophy does not lose sight of the essential question, its answer is always the same; an answer given by Socrates, Schopenhauer, Solomon, Buddha”. “To go on living knowing that life is a stupid joke played upon us. . . . was to me repulsive and tormenting, but I remained in that position”. “My position was terrible—I knew I could find nothing along the path of reasonable knowledge, except a denial of life; and in faith I could find nothing but a denial of reason, still more impossible to me than a denial of life”.

“Finally I saw that my mistake lay in ever expecting an

examination of finite things to supply a meaning to life. The finite has no ultimate meaning apart from the infinite. The two must be linked together before an answer to life's problems can be reached."

Then he sought help of the religious people—Buddhists, Mohammedans, Christians of all types, including evangelicals who profess salvation by belief in the Redemption. He returned to the Church. "Never shall I forget the painful feeling I experienced the day I received the Eucharist for the first time after many years. The service, confession and prayers were quite intelligible and produced in me a glad consciousness that the meaning of life was being revealed to me. The Communion itself I explained as an act performed in remembrance of Christ and indicating a purification from sin and the full acceptance of Christ's teaching. If that explanation was artificial, I did not notice the artificiality; so happy was I at humbling myself before the priest—a simple, timid, country clergyman—turning all the dirt out of my soul and confessing my vices; so glad was I to merge in thought with the humility of the Fathers who wrote the prayers of the office, so glad was I of union with all who have believed and now believe, that I did not notice the artificiality of my explanation. But when I approached the altar gates and the priest made me say that I believed that what I was about to swallow was truly flesh and blood, I felt a pain in my heart; it was not merely a false note, it was a cruel demand made by someone or other who had evidently never known what faith is. . . . It was indescribably painful to me. . . . I humbled myself and swallowed that flesh and blood without any blasphemous feelings, and with a wish to believe. But the blow had been struck, and knowing what awaited me, I could not go a second time."

Then like Bunyan he listened to the conversation of some illiterate peasants—"about God, faith, life and salvation, and a knowledge of faith revealed itself to me"—and on turning to the Gospels he found in the five precepts of Matthew 5 a sure foundation for faith and life.¹⁶

(16) *Perris*: p. 159.

1. "To offend no one, and by no act to excite evil in others, for out of evil comes evil.

2. To be in all things chaste, and not to quit the wife whom we have taken.

3. Never to take an oath, because we can promise nothing, for man is altogether in the hands of the Father, and oaths are imposed for wicked ends.

4. Not to resist evil, to bear with offenses, and to do yet more than is demanded of us; neither to judge nor to go to law, for every man is himself full of faults and cannot teach. By seeking revenge men only teach others to do the same.

5. To make no distinction between our own countrymen and foreigners, for all men are children of one Father.

In other words "Do not be angry"; "Do not lust"; "Do not give away the control of your future actions"; "Do not use violence against men who act in a way you disapprove of"; and "Love your enemies".

Here is Mr. Aylmer Maude's comment¹⁷: "By arriving at the conclusion that we are parts of a moral universe, and only in so far as we discern that order and adjust ourselves to it, has life any meaning and purpose that is not defeated by death, Tolstoy reached the ultimate root of religion. Through strife and suffering to have found it by his own effort, and to have proclaimed it in the teeth of those who denounced him as a heretic and atheist, as well as of those who sneered at him as a superstitious dotard, is an achievement that entitles him to rank among the prophets."

For the remaining thirty-two years of his life he devoted himself to the heroic attempt to warm the winter's cold from his own fire; he tried to practice the meaning of life, which had now become plain to him. His own account of his life was that it fell into three periods—in the first he served himself; in the second he served his fellows; in the third he served God. The following titles of books he wrote in the third period will indicate the center of his interest: "*Criticism of Dogmatic Theology*"; "*My Religion*"; "*What Then Must*

(17) Maude: Vol. II: p. 38.

We Do?"; "*The Kingdom of God is Within You*"; "*Reason and Religion*"; "*Religions and Morality*"; "*How to Read the Gospels*"; "*Christianity and Patriotism*"; "*What is Religion?*". And on the side of practice his renunciations included all his estates, property in his books, luxury in food and dress (at one time he was a dandy), hunting, of which he was very fond, meat, tobacco and for a time even horse-back riding; while he still reproached himself that he found it so difficult to match a Christian peasant, Soutaef, in altering his life to suit his perception of what was right. As to his inner life of communion with God he writes to a friend (1901¹⁸) "I have long since formed the habit of praying every morning in solitude", and then he gives as his prayer a remarkable paraphrase of the Lord's prayer, and adds: "Besides that prayer.... I read the thoughts of Saints and Sages, not Christians only, and I meditate, seeking out what in God's sight there is of evil in my heart, and trying to rid myself of it. I also try to pray in active life, when I am among people and passions assail me. Then I try to remember what went on in my soul when I prayed in solitude, and the more sincere my prayer was, the more easily do I refrain from evil".

Earlier (1889) he had written to another friend: "I often say to myself 'Live rejoicing unceasingly in (what no one can anywhere prevent) the joy of doing God's will in purity, humility and love.'" And again: "It is for the most part well with my soul. Indeed it would be a sin were it not so. Seldom a day passes without joyful proofs that the fire which Christ brought to earth is kindling more and more".

That he classified himself as a Christian is shown in other letters. For example:¹⁹ "The saying of Christ that—'If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me' was true in His time, and is true in ours; a follower of Christ must be ready to be poor and to suffer; if not he cannot be His disciple". This letter

(18) Maude: Vol. II: p. 61.

(19) Maude: Vol. II: p. 356.

is signed—"Your Brother in Christ, Leo Tolstoy." In 1885 his friend Frey had urged him to renounce the name of Christianity for his system. Tolstoy replied:²⁰ "I cannot do so, for all I know comes from Christ, and I am still continually learning from Him, I think I shall learn yet more in the future". And once more:²¹ "Please don't be frightened at the word 'Christianity'—I mean nothing mystical, but simply the love of man by man". In 1894 his friend Gay had finished his picture of the Crucifixion;²² he brought it to show to Tolstoy who asked to be left alone with it. Gay on returning to the room found him in tears. Embracing him Tolstoy said: "I feel, dear friend, that *that* was how it really happened"!

Of Nietzsche he said:²³ "He was a real madman, but what talent! . . . Great God, what savagery! It is terrible so to drag down Christianity!"

At the last his tone was gentle, submissive, trustful: "I am eighty years old, and I am still searching for truth". "Physical and mental strength decreases but something else (moral strength) greatly increases. I would on no account exchange what I am now, for what I was sixty years ago."

This article might end here, for it contains a description for the most part in Tolstoy's own words, of his religion. But inadequate as the description is, it yet raises questions which carry us beyond Tolstoy and the classification to which he is entitled as a religious man. As to the latter, we are not prepared to fix his classification till we have taken account of his attitude towards various conceptions of the subject matter of religion. He defines religion as "a certain relation established by man between his separate personality and the infinite universe or its source; and morality is the ever present guide to life resulting from that relation". "Every sane man must of necessity have a religion (whether of selfishness, or patriotism, or obedience to some Lord or Law): that is to say, must

(20) *Ibid.*: p. 221.

(21) *Maude*: Vol. II: p. 483.

(22) *Ibid.*: p. 492.

(23) *Maude*: Vol. II: p. 499.

have some outlook on life enabling him to know why he approves of some things and disapproves of others”.

We have seen that he was a man of prayer, but he did not believe in the personality of God.²⁴ He often speaks of the guidance of God, but after such a reference he remarked:²⁵ “I speak of a *personal* God, whom I do not acknowledge for the sake of convenience of expression”. “I believe in God, whom I understand as Spirit, as Love, as the source of all. I believe that He is in me, and I in Him. I believe that the will of God is most clearly and intelligently expressed in the teaching of the Man Jesus, whom to consider and pray to, as God, I esteem the greatest blasphemy”.²⁶ His frank eclecticism in religion is shown in the following quotation from “What is Religion” (1902): “For us the true religion is Christianity in those of its principles in which it agrees, not with the external forms, but with the basic principles of Brahmanism, Confucianism, Taoism, Hebraism, Buddhism, and even Mohammedanism. And these principles are very simple, intelligible and clear.

They are: That there is a God, the origin of all things; that in man dwells a spark from that Divine Origin, that man by his way of living, can increase or decrease that spark in himself; that to increase this divine spark man must suppress his passions and increase love in himself; and that the practical means to attain this result is to do to others as you would that they should do to you”. From this it will be clear that Tolstoy will hear of Redemption with impatience, and even with resentment. To a young evangelist, William Fettle²⁷ who had spoken of Christ as the Saviour of sinners by means of his death and resurrection he cried out: “I cannot listen to you. Much better is it for us to walk in silence than to speak so unprofitably”. In the same conversation Mr. Fettle had spoken of Jesus as a living Saviour, and of the Christian hope of His appearing. To this Tolstoy replied: “I have no

(24) Maude: Vol. II: p. 60.

(25) *Ibid*: p. 645.

(26) *Ibid* II: p. 580.

(27) With Christ in Russia—by Latimer.

such expectation. If some one were to come here to us now and tell us that the risen Christ had arrived in Yasnaya Polyana, and was walking in the garden over there, I would not care to have a look at Him. It is a mere superstition. He has been dead for nearly two milleniums". The only resurrection he believed in appears in a comment he wrote on the Dourkobors²⁸ (Spirit Wrestlers who interested him profoundly)—“the germinating of the seed sown by Christ eighteen hundred years ago, the resurrection of Christ himself.”

Of course he rejects the whole Pauline interpretation of Christianity, feeling no need of Paul's “doctrinal apparatus or propitiatory machinery”.²⁹ “Do not quote Paul to me. I do not believe in Paul”.

“I hold the doctrine of Salvation by the blood of Christ to be one of the most irrational, senseless, unsubstantiated of opinions; a gross superstition. . . . men have no need of rescue. They require no Saviour's blood, they must only do God's will. . . . Love God and thy neighbor. In this consisted the whole law”.³⁰

In the novel entitled “*Resurrection*” (1899), just after an evangelical preacher had said “Let us praise the Lord, who has given His only begotten Son for the redemption of mankind. His holy blood”. . . . we read—“Neklyudoff felt so deeply disgusted that he rose silently and frowning and keeping back a groan of shame, he left on tiptoe, and went to his room”.³¹ Yet he writes in *My Religion*—“I believe that nothing but the fulfillment of the doctrine of Jesus can give true happiness to men. . . . I cannot refuse to obey it, if I would save my life from the certainty of eternal loss. . . . The doctrine of Jesus Christ is a doctrine of grace and truth. Once I knew not grace and knew not truth. I understand and believe now that the good toward which I was attracted is the will of the Father, the essence of life”.³²

(28) Maude: Vol. II: p. 508.

(29) W. James: *Varieties of Religious Experiences*, p. 211.

(30) *Resurrection*: p. 303.

(31) *My Religion*: p. 245.

(32) *Letter*: Oct., 1910.

From these quotations it will be seen that Tolstoy knew Jesus only as a Sage, the greatest of the sages; and thus in Tolstoy's experience we have presented in the concrete "the modern issue as to the person of Jesus Christ".³³

A student once asked Phillips Brooks the question—"Is conscious personal fellowship with Jesus Christ part of Christianity"? The great preacher hesitated, reflected and replied decisively—"Conscious personal fellowship with Jesus Christ is Christianity. That is what differentiates the religion of the Bible from all others". Tolstoy's religion was not of this type; and yet it has to be admitted that he attained a high character under the discipline of religion; and that he exhibited an almost unique loyalty to what he felt to be his duty—"Acting contrary to the Law of Christ is worse than death".³⁴ He protests, "the great sin is to lower the ideal of Christ in order to make it attainable".

Miss Jane Addams visited him (1896) and wrote—³⁵ "The glimpse of Tolstoy has made a profound impression on me; not so much by what he said, as the life, the gentleness, the Christianity in the soul of him".

To sum up, though one hesitates to attempt a summary of elements apparently so contradictory; for we are dealing with one who has much in common with the medieval saint and the oriental fatalist; and who never wholly escaped from the clash of contrary ideals and tendencies in his own soul.

1—The background of all his thinking about religion is the Greek Catholic Church. Remember that, and consider that he lived through the last half of the nineteenth century. He never felt to the full the stress of the Darwinian revolution, but he knew and responded to the deeper reaction of philosophy and criticism against traditional views of religion. He characterized Renan's "Life of Jesus" as a "merely childish, trivial and mean prank"; but Voltaire, Schopenhauer and other philosophers, together with the study of comparative Religion led him into deep revolt against the Orthodox Greek

³³ *Rev. & Expos.*: Jan, 1911.

³⁴ Letter to Rev. Aldin Ballou.

³⁵ *Maude*: Vol. II: p. 525

Church. He says—³⁶ “No religion has ever preached things so evidently incompatible with reason and with contemporary knowledge or so immoral as the doctrine preached by Church-Christianity”. So violent was this revolt that, though he met and conversed with, and was deeply impressed by many simple believers, yet evangelical Christianity was never fairly faced, and accordingly never gained access to his mind. His experience at the Communion, recited earlier in this paper was “indescribably painful”, and yet he probably never again came so near to the Kingdom in the evangelical sense of the phrase as on that day. “Knowing what awaited me I could not go a second time”; and his complete rejection of Evangelicalism was from that day inevitable. In the presence of such a tragedy one feels that a petrified ecclesiasticism calling itself Christianity is a crime against mankind, a monstrous hindrance to honest religion.

It is idle to guess what might have been the result if Tolstoy's approach to Christianity had been through the ministry of, say, Stundists, for example; but we may be permitted to wish that so sincere an inquirer might have been spared the painful, and as it proved, vain struggle to find the truth in the venerated paganism of his native “Orthodox Church”.

2—He is a thorough-going rationalist. Says Maude ³⁷—“Some men take to religion at the prompting of the heart; others at the prompting of the brain; and Tolstoy belongs to the latter category, not from lack of heart, but because, strong as are his emotions, his intellectual powers are stronger still”. He recovered the God, whom he lost in his youth, at the end of a syllogism—³⁸“I know that I shall be blamed; but still I must repeat! ‘Reason, Reason, Reason.’ There is no other way to reach the truth”. And he repeatedly resents the charge of being a mystic, of claiming an inner light denied to other men. Indeed his rejection of the personality of God carried with it a denial of Revelation, and laid on the reason the whole burden of finding truth. The truth

(36) *What is Religion?*

(37) *Vol. I: p. 400.*

(38) *Ibid: Vol. I: p. 416.*

Jesus found, he found in this way. So Buddha also. And Tolstoy's religion is a blend of Buddhist and Christian elements—the Buddhist elements predominating. That is to say, he takes his place among the Enlightened, not among the Redeemed; and the enlightenment he attained he attained like Buddha, in a long and stressful meditation accompanied by painful ascetic disciplines. We have seen that in his youth he used to beat his bare back with a rope till the tears would flow down his cheeks. In his eightieth year he wrote—³⁹“Nothing really would so fully satisfy me, or give me such pleasure as to be put in prison, in a real, good, stinking, cold, hungry, prison”. In his Confession he recites his adoption of asceticism: “The aim of man in life is to save his soul; and to save his soul he must live godly; and to live godly he must renounce all the pleasures of life, must labor, humble himself, suffer and be merciful”. These words might have been taken from a manual of Buddhist piety. And, indeed, the three periods of Tolstoy's life correspond in a striking, and by no means superficial way with the three periods in the life of Gautama—the periods, namely, of absorption in the pleasures of life, of search for the meaning of life, of enlightenment and effort to make others see the light. More especially do Tolstoy's Buddhist affinities appear in his idea of the future:⁴⁰ “If one is to understand by life beyond the grave, the Second Advent, a hell with eternal torments, devils, and a Paradise of perpetual happiness—it is perfectly true that I do not acknowledge such a life beyond the grave; but eternal life and retribution here and everywhere, now and forever, I acknowledge to such an extent that standing now at the verge of the grave, I often have to make an effort to restrain myself from desiring the death of this body, that is birth to a new life; and I believe that every good action increases the true welfare of my eternal life, and every evil action decreases it”. Here

(39) Maude: Vol. II: p. 636.

(40) Maude: Vol. II: p. 579.

surely, is a close approach to the Buddhist doctrine of retribution (Karma).

“The characteristic word of Christianity is—‘Grace’ as the characteristic word of Buddhism is Karma. Grace is the bending love and the stooping pity which looses us from our past, which delivers us from our burdens and weakness. Karma is the quality of our actions, which determines our future condition by the blind and unconscious concatenation of cause and effect, by dark and capricious regulations and consequences”.⁴¹

It is true that Tolstoy reproaches Buddhism because it gives up this world as a bad job and because it accepts what is wrong in it as inevitable⁴²—whereas true Christianity undertakes to establish a Kingdom of Righteousness here and now. And it is also true, that though he was fascinated by the Buddhist conception of Nirvana, there is no evidence that he adopted the vast cycles of existences (transmigration of souls) through which the individual, according to the Buddhist system, is to attain Nirvana; his own conception of personal immortality was too vague for that. Yet it remains true that his religious system, following a clue given him by Schopenhauer, is an amalgamation of the principles of Buddhism and Christianity.⁴³

3—I have said that the Buddhist elements predominate. To put this proposition beyond dispute, it is only necessary to consider one other point—the forgiveness of sins. Here he falls far short of the Christian view, and of the Christian experience.

We have seen that Tolstoy suffered terribly in his periodic repentances⁴⁴ and there is deep pathos in that passage of the Confession in which he describes his hunger for God. But his repentance—better call it remorse—, and his dealings with God never yielded a sense of sins forgiven. The Epistle to the Hebrews was a sealed book to him; the cleansed conscience

(41) W. Robertson Nicoll.

(42) Maude: Vol. II: p. 607.

(43) Ferris: Leo Tolstoy, p. 65.

(44) Maude: Vol. I: p. 219.

was a piece of self-deception. Goethe and Ibsen and Tolstoy; Augustine, Luther and Bunyan—these two groups make conspicuous the distinction here pointed out. The first three felt the soul-sickness as poignantly as any men who ever lived; but it is to the other three we must look to find the cure in an experience of free forgiveness through Christ the Redeemer.

Now, the forgiveness of sins is a transaction between persons, and no one who evaporates his God into "a spiritual element"⁴⁵ is ever likely to know the meaning of it; as no sunny-minded, sky-blue Pantheist will ever know the meaning of it. Bunyan came on the line of conscience to despair—it was a sense of sin and guilt—and the relief he found was *a cleansing of his conscience*; and his peace was as a river. Tolstoy came on the line of reason to despair—it was a discovery of the vanity of life—and such relief as he found was in a *view of the world and of life (Weltanschauung)*. I do not mean to depreciate the relief Tolstoy found; it was immense, and it may even be admitted that some who find the other type of relief miss this; reconciled to God, they never attain a satisfying world-view. But the relief of forgiveness is after all, deeper than the relief of enlightenment, and Tolstoy's Diary may be cited in proof. As late as 1903⁴⁶ he writes: "I am now experiencing the torments of hell. I remember all the abominations of my former life". One finds no indication that he ever heard the words—"Thy sins are forgiven thee; go in peace". On the contrary, he is constantly encouraging people never to cease to strive to attain goodness; they will succeed if they persevere. But their success will be their own achievement—an achievement made by main force, so to speak; there is no atoning Saviour, no Living Lord to help, and no blotting out of past sins as a thick cloud. And to the last, his own struggle, while not without hope, retained the sombre hue, as of one resolved to fight the last fight with courage, even though the issue might remain hidden from his

(45) Maude: Vol. II: p. 677.

(46) Maude: Vol. II: p. 402.

eyes. It was a struggle to live up to the ideal required by the Kingdom of God⁴⁷ "to realize which we must be as perfect as the Father, *i. e.* the ideal of external as well as internal perfection". He tried to live up to this ideal of love without the help of Him Who set it before us, the Living Lord of Love. Christ alone can give the life He demands; and Tolstoy came to attach less and less importance to Christ's personality, saying in a letter (1900)⁴⁸ of a book he read: "In this book it is very well argued (the probability is as strong *against* as *for*) that Christ never existed". To such a mind the Sermon on the Mount is not a Gospel but a condemnation, not a salvation, but a doom. Surely Paul and Augustine are sounder teachers here: Paul who gives his autobiography in four words—"Christ liveth in me"; and Augustine, who prays, "O Lord, give what Thou commandest, and then command what Thou wilt". Tolstoy never got out of the seventh chapter of Romans—never beyond the "O wretched man that I am"! of that chapter, and one listens in vain through all his experience for the apostolic assurance and gratitude: "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord"; or for the apostolic paean of praise "Unto Him that loveth us, and loosed us from our sins in His blood. . . . to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever, Amen".

4—One point more. We have seen in the discussion of the last point that Tolstoy's "Christianity" errs by defect, by a fatal defect: he misses the essential Christian fact, the forgiveness of sins through our Lord Jesus Christ, and is thus thrown into the company of all those—Buddhists and others—who are struggling unaided up some "eight-fold path" toward perfection. And true to his rationalist bent, religion with him⁴⁹ is "the sense of a relation which man himself establishes between himself and the infinite life surrounding him; and faith is man's consciousness of this relationship, his consciousness that his position in the world is such as obliges him to do certain things". "Faith is a relation man is con-

(47) Maude: Vol. II: p. 415.

(48) Maude: Vol. II: p. 598 ff.

(49) Maude: Vol. II: p. 125.

scious of towards the infinite universe, and from this relation the direction of his activity results". Thus religion is a perception of certain truths about one's world and his place in it; in a word, a view of the world. And he exhorts people to change their views, their outlook on life. He regrets his inability to help the poor upon whom he had bestowed alms, because nothing short of a change of their views of life would really meet their case.⁵⁰ All he could do was to tell them his own views, the truths he had found; and he held on to the conviction⁵¹ that "a message exists which can destroy all evil in men and give them universal welfare". In this Tolstoy has not gone beyond Socrates, and he knows of no provision of cleansing the tainted will and creating in a perverted will a purpose to do the right which the intellect perceives. Tolstoy does not know Religion as a personal fellowship with a personal God, who, according to Christianity, is in and through Jesus Christ a Redeeming God. And Tolstoy did not perceive that "the thing we are redeemed from is not chiefly ignorance or pain, but guilt". Mr. Harold Begbie's "*Twice-Born Men*" are in no doubt that they have been redeemed from guilt, set right with the Holy God; and their song is not of a *new view*, or set of views, but of a *new life* in Christ Jesus.

In conclusion. It does not lie in our province to fix the point Tolstoy reached in his upward striving. But no one acquainted with his life, his opinions, the range and depth of his interest and his teachings will deny him a place among the sages, and some will even give him a place among the saints. His discovery of the vanity of the worldly life, of the line of usefulness in loving service, and his loyalty to the light as far as he saw it, go far towards overbalancing his marked limitations. When looked at from the point of view of a Christian interpretation of life, the central difficulty presented by his career is this: Granting his willingness to do the will of God (John 7:17), how account for his failure to see the full meaning of the religion of the Incarnation?

(50) *Ibid.*: Vol. II: p. 653.

Truth in the form of Law came by Moses, Confucius, Lao Tse, Buddha. Truth in the form of Grace came by Jesus Christ. And a man who is willing to do the truth he knows is surely in the way of knowing all truth.

The merely inquisitive mind is sure to ask: Was Tolstoy "saved"? To which the proper and only reply is:

"Will not the Judge of All the Earth do right".