

Some Religious and Social Ideas of Tolstoy

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In our individual lives and in our common social life we are constantly going through processes of readjustment, changing and modifying our institutions, customs and conventionalities to suit the changing conceptions of life. In spite of our inherent conservatism, we are constantly in the process [of] change because change and growth is also intimately a part of our life process. When an institution becomes established we are rather inclined to hold onto it simply because it is established. There is a natural tendency to become Pharisees, and estimate the worth of an institution or a custom by its origin, its history, and the human effort expended in its establishment. But just as we are beginning to congratulate ourselves upon the perfection of what we have done, and the smoothness with which it works, and to straighten up our shoulders and proclaim far and wide how wonderful is our machine, and with what effort and sacrifice we have built it, along comes some far-seeing prophet and asks us whether or not the institution or the custom is actually meeting the conditions of life, and fulfilling its function of ministering unto men. No sooner had Pharoah perfected the institution of Egyptian bondage, than along came Moses with his cool and discerning insight, and condemns the whole thing, frees the children of Israel from the bondage of Egypt, and leads them up across the wilderness into the promised land. He did not ask how old this system was, whether it was of divine origin or not, or how much it cost Pharoah to establish it. He simply asked, "Does it make for the fulfillment of human life?" The answer was, "No." Then it must be left behind.

So also did Amos ask, and Isaiah and Nehemiah.² No sooner had the Jerusalem cult upon its return from the exile built up its

¹ This is from the bound collection that includes sermons from August 30, 1908 to November 26, 1908.

² According to the New International Version [NIV] Study Bible, the book of Amos is fundamentally about social justice and the indispensable expression of true piety; see p. 1337 and Amos

system of worship, of fasting and prayers, and its intricate network of laws and ceremonies, than Jesus came along declaring them to be negligible quantities. It did not disturb him that they claimed the origin of supernatural revelation, nor did it occur to him to ask how much they had cost in the way of human effort, or indeed how old they might be. He goes immediately beneath all these questions down to the essential one, "Do they minister unto the moral and the spiritual life of man?" If they do not, so much the worse for them. Read with care the sermon on the mount³, and the invectives against the scribes and the Pharisees. You cannot fail to see how little regard Jesus had for any institution as such. The institution and the custom was a machine to be made use of in serving the moral and the spiritual wellbeing of man. If it no longer served that end, then let it pass into the oblivion of the past. He was interested in the moral and the spiritual life in the inner workings of the personality, in that eternal force and purpose in man which is forever making, creating and destroying customs and institutions. He was one who sees beneath the form into the heart and the spirit of things. He was a prophet, a seer, a measurer of values in life.

Of much the same order also is Count Leo Tolstoy, who is often spoken of as the grand old man of Russia, the 80th anniversary of whose birth was celebrated on Thursday of this week, September 10, according to our calendar, and August 28, according to the calendar of Russia. It would be folly for me to say that I know much about the man who for so many years has been a literary and revolutionary [sic], not alone in Russia, but throughout the civilized world. I have not even made what may be called a study of his writings, or his life, but he interests me very deeply for the very same reason that the personality of Jesus appeals to me. He is not conventional, he is not formal, he is interested in the soul of things. He goes beneath the surface with an inquiring spirit, deep and reverential so far as the eternal forces of life are concerned, but merciless and probing so far as the forms, customs and institutions are concerned, and lays bare for your inspection and contemplation the essential and the abiding forces. Sometimes he shocks, and startles and almost makes one cringe as he dissects and places his valuation

5:24: "But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!"

³ See Matthew 5-7.

for human life on many of the cherished and most firmly established of our institutions. But even that is healthy for it shakes our complacency, and compels us to consider, and to distinguish between the passing and the permanent, between the machinery and the spiritual power of human life.

Born of the nobility, trained and educated for the conventional life of the Russian Noble, he entered the army, and was active in its guerrilla expeditions. The literary instinct led him into writing of the army life. True to his prophetic nature, he had to go beneath the surface of events in human life, and ferret out the deeper forces of passion and purpose that are behind the events. He became, in short, a romanticist, portraying in his stories the power of passion and ideals in the affairs of life.

Travels on the continent served but to stimulate this spirit, and to widen the horizon of his vision, and perhaps to leave in his mind a deposit of the heresies of modern thought. Then, back again to his native Russia, with the new spirit of life pulsating through his veins, into the atmosphere of a dead and stifling formalism which sacrificed upon the altar of institutional authority every noblest instinct of man, into that atmosphere of Russian autocracy, alive only with the fear and hatred of class feelings, on the one side supported by the power of the military life, and on the other, by that horrible dread of the angry mob as it had revealed itself in the French revolution. To a man such as Tolstoy is, these conditions could have but no other effect than to produce the most violent reaction. The fermenting spirit of the free soul cannot be constrained within the old wineskins, any more than the power of the internal boiling mass of molten lava can be restrained by the rock-ribbed strength of Vesuvius.

It is said that, returning from the wonderful ceremonial attendant upon the accession of Alexander the third, reeking with the whole atmosphere of the ritual and formalism of the Greek Catholic Church, Tolstoy, depressed by the sight, sickened by the odor of incense, picked up the New Testament and read the sermon on the mount. Out of that world of ritual, superstition, ignorance, grandiose splendor, devoid of all life, hollow and damp from the long darkness of subterranean sophistry, out of all that, into the simple human uplifting natural religion and moral uplift of the simple carpenter of Nazareth. How great is

the contrast? We cannot even picture it to ourselves. There are no contrasts in our life that begin to reach it, unless it be the contrast of our own conventional ideas of life and religion and those of Jesus. To say that it is like finding our way home to those whom we know and love after being lost for years in a dismal forest, is but to play with words.

But the dismal night of uncertainty, and questioning doubt, of hesitation and inactivity had passed and Tolstoy awoke to a new world. Indeed, he had been into the Garden of Gethsemane,⁴ and upon the mount of transfiguration. He had seen the splendor of human life, not in its forms, and conventionalities, ceremonies and ritualism, but in its pulsating throbbing purposes and aspirations.

Out of this transformation comes the new Tolstoy, the Tolstoy, who is interesting, who is vital, who takes the measuring rod of his natural religion, of the simple way of life, as he had seen that Jesus had taught it and lived it, and measures our "machine-ly" breed and "machine-ly" crammed lives, and discloses to us with almost a cruel bluntness the extent to which we come short of the fullness of the stature of manhood as it was conceived in the life of Jesus.

By many, Tolstoy has been called insane in his conduct and thought since the time when his new ideas of life as he had found them interpreted in the sayings of Jesus began to be known through his writings and also in his conduct. For many years the watchword of the liberal tendency in the churches has been back to Jesus. But, for the most part, we have been like the man who wished to get away from the turmoil of life and get a rest in the heart of the forest. This poor man took with him quite all the truck and trumpery that he would escape from, and that carried with it a lot of people who seem to be identified only with truck and trumpery. After the poor man had settled himself, he found that he had brought with him all that he would have escaped, and he could not understand why he found nothing there in the forest but the distractions of the usual life. He did not know that only the naked soul can be still and know that God is God.

⁴ See Matthew 26:36ff.

So we have gone back to Jesus, but in our journey we have carried whole trainloads of the baggage, of the baggage of prejudice that not only does not help, but is a positive injury to the prospects that we have of sitting down in the quiet of meditation and seeing as Jesus saw the simple naked beauty of human life. Tolstoy, I think, did do what we have tried to do. He saw the vision of life as Jesus saw it.

In the passages which I read for the scripture lesson,⁵ Tolstoy found the heart of Jesus' attitude towards life. These strange sayings of Jesus, which many have tried to explain away by some dialectic of logic, Tolstoy took on their simple and natural and literal sense. They mean just what they [say]. They worked themselves out in his famous doctrine of non-resistance. Evil is in the nature of a trespass by one personality upon another. Such a trespass, as a person might commit against your personality, you are not to resent by any law of retaliation, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, but you are to entirely overlook the trespass, more than that, you are to turn upon the trespasser with a right good will, and not only forgive and forget, but overcome the evil with good. As the subject of the book in which he expresses some of these views indicates, his whole thought is that the kingdom of God is within you. His philosophy of religion is seen in the thought that there are three stages in the development of religious ideas. The first is the childhood stage of the nations when man thinks of the whole universe as created for him and centering on him. In the second stage, which is the maturity of nations, each nation believes that all true religion centers in it. Finally, in the perfected conception of nations, man has the idea of fulfilling the will of the supreme Being and considers himself an instrument for that purpose. Christianity was to Tolstoy a new life conception, the beginning of the realization of the third stage. In the development of the religious life, when man should regard himself only as the medium for revealing and realizing the divine will. In this new life conception one's own personal interests in himself as an end are to be forgotten. Man lives only to minister unto others. That is to be the natural and the spontaneous affection in life of all men as it was in the disciples of Jesus. Man, the individual person, has no demands to make, only service to render. He is to lay up no treasure on

⁵ Unfortunately, the manuscript for this sermon does not identify these texts.

earth, he is to take no thought of the morrow; he is not to resist evil; but is to give himself and all he has to the life of man. All these teachings Tolstoy takes in their literal and obvious meaning, and if one is to live the Christ life, these teachings are to be obeyed implicitly. In this it seems to me that Tolstoy is right. The more deeply one studies into the meaning and the life conception as it appeared to Jesus, the more clear does it appear that these remarkable teachings of Jesus, which the Christian Church has succeeded in disobeying and rendering void for 1900 years, were intended as literal statements of plain facts and principles.

Starting from this point, Tolstoy follows through the whole line of institutions and measures them by the standard of Jesus' teaching, and finds them deficient. He calls attention to the fact of the organized violation of the teaching of non-resistance as indicated in the standing armies of the various nations. They are maintained to prevent and to punish trespass against personal rights. In the first place, to prevent trespass and injury to the church of Christ, and to punish such trespass. But what right has the church to resort to such means? Its mission is to serve, to give itself freely and completely together with all that it has to man. The mercilessness with which he probes into the very heart of all the religious conventionalities is refreshing and wholesome. The church has nothing to protect. If it has, it holds it in defiance of the express teachings of its founder. Let it give them up. In the same way, the government and the nobility demand the protection of the standing army and the police force. But what have they to protect? It is their business to serve and not to be served. Let their pretensions cease.

In Tolstoy we have no half-hearted critic. He goes the full length of the line. The family receives its attention, and the conventional world has not yet recovered from the mercilessness with which he exposed some of the conventional Pharisee-ism of our social life as connected with the family. The vicious influence of our practices of breaking a law of the divine life that we may conform to a conventional whim and a selfish pride, have not yet brought to us our full fruitage of suffering and shame. It is true that the official life of the Russian court offered him most vicious conditions for the raw material of his treatment of this subject. But even this people of the United States is not free to cast the first stone. But to him, the law

of the married relation was still the law of giving, of giving one's whole soul to the one whom one loves. It is not a contract, but a fusion of lives in the service of mankind.

Thus do the two great factors of life, society, as seen in the Church and the state, and the family receive the sharp and by no means superficial criticism of his keen and searching mind. They have violated the first law of the teaching of Christ. To maintain the false condition created by this violation, they maintain the system of army and police to protect them in their sin.

Last, but by no means least important, I shall try to speak of his attitude towards property. In this, as in other things, his point of view is only to be understood when one realizes that he regards the whole of life as a service to mankind. In this service there shall be no reservations, no hidden treasures to be used in the day of failure, no reserve for a day of want. The service demanded is just that whole-souled service that one sees rarely when under the pressure of a great inspiring motive, a man gives all and risks all for his country, his ideal. In his devotion to his new conception of life, man shall give in service himself and his all. Even more, those things that are required by him in the service, he shall not for one moment regard as his own. They are the property of the common life even as he is the servant of the common life. He uses them as they increase his efficiency in the common service. They are a part of the community wealth.

Now you see what a daring, and indeed, what a logical and revolutionary kind of a social life Tolstoy worked out from the thorough-going and fearless application of the fundamental idea of life as the service to the common good in obedience to the divine will. How strange it would seem to be living in a nation modeled after these lines! No standing army, no police force, no prisons, no private property except those personal effects which are a part of the personality itself. Each one, as he goes about, will be seeking constantly to give whatever he has of worth in the way of labor, of thought, of moral conduct. There would be a constant atmosphere like that which we try to infuse into the few holidays at Christmastime. There would be no fear of poverty, there would be no greed of luxury, because life would be measured in quite other terms. Not by what one has taken out of the commonwealth for his own personal ends, but

[by] what one has put into the commonwealth in the way of free service, will be the standard of measuring the excellence of human life. No idleness, no want and hunger. Yes, it is a strange and fascinating picture of life. It is quite beyond the comprehension of our self-seeking mode of living today. But to many, as it is to Tolstoy, this is the ideal suggestion of the kingdom of God on earth towards which we move with a halting hitching gait. Whether it is anything more than the dream of the dreamer only the unrevealed mysteries of the future can say. But it is a dream of a world of the moral and the spiritual life, where things and conventionalities take their proper place in the life of man, and where peace and goodwill reign. I think that it was some such dream as this that fired the soul of Jesus as he stood by his carpenter bench, earning the support for his mother and his brothers and sisters. I think that it was some such a vision as this that ravished his soul as he walked among the hills of Palestine and sat on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and drew from the life about him those noble thoughts, that struck deep into the minds of the common people of Palestine, that came to Tolstoy sickened and discouraged by the cruel institutions and conventionalities of Russian life, and gave him the star to which he might hitch his wagon of hope and aspiration.

But that is the far end of what Tolstoy has to say in his measurement of human life. Even as we dream and fly away on the wings of our imagination to the pictured ideal of a new heaven and a new earth we must not forget that we are living on the earth and that if we are to do the first thing towards the coming of the kingdom of God, about which the church has been talking for centuries, we must use our opportunity our raw material that is right here in the life and the conditions in which we live. Out of such as we are, must come forth the new heaven and the new earth.

First and before all else, we must leave behind us that habit of small minds which estimates man by the kind of work that he does or just where he happens to live. I know of nothing that makes me so ashamed and disgusted with men as when I find those who even for the moment ever slip into a frame of mind which in any way suggests superiority or inferiority. Burns⁶ struck a true note in life when he penned his little poem "A Man's a Man for

⁶ Robert Burns (1759-1817) Scottish poet.

a' That." To hold one's self above one or beneath another, that is at once the fawning servility of the courtier and the slave. No man of self-respect or dignity will for one moment permit himself to do that. We recognize differences in personality, in tastes, we cannot, as we are men, recognize any frame of mind that suggests that I am holier than thou or better than thou. In each person is the spirit of the living God. This one discipline accomplished, and it will be surprising how far that has taken us away from our pettiness towards the larger life.

But still more pointed is the arrow of truth that comes to us from the quiver of Tolstoy wounding our pet whims about the permanence and value of forms and conventionalities, in social life, in religion, and in civic life. The forms are passing and changing shapes and phantoms which serve us for the day, and are left behind even as the dying leaves that have served as the organs of nourishment for the growth of the plant life are being left behind in the onward march of the seasons. The internal spirit and the eternal power are the permanent forces in life. When you feel that that power is waning, then comes the danger. That dependence upon forms has been, and is now, the serious menace to our life. When people rely upon external stimulation, upon ritual in religion, upon exciting sport for their exercise and pleasure, upon drugs and stimulants for their relaxation, and upon wealth for their sense of personal worth, then rest assured that the true spirit of the glowing life is ebbing away. Over all these things we are masters. They are the working tools of the life of the spirit. In every nook and corner of our social life today we have come very closely to that reliance upon the passing forms that Max Nordau⁷ says is the evidence of degeneration. Would that there might be one breath of the spirit that would send our modern idols tottering to the ground. Then at least would we feel the thrill of being cast away from the moorings of a safe and sane conventionality out into the open sea of a new and un-conventionalized world. Let us cast behind us all conformity and acquaint ourselves at first hand with the Deity. Let us also cast behind us all conformity and acquaint ourselves at first hand with the aspiring soul of man, as he goes about our streets and lives his life. In him is the spirit of the living God. In him is truth, beauty and goodness. He is

⁷ Max Nordau (1849-1923) Zionist leader, physician, author and social critic, author of *The Conventional Lies of Our Civilization*, 1884.

the living Christ, and deep in his soul is the spring from whence flows the stream of the infinite and from whence we may fill that Holy Grail of the infinite life. Have we the faith?