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Count Tolstoy

MY RELIGION

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

- 2/6 A RUSSIAN PROPRIETOR.**
,, THE COSSACKS.
,, IVAN ILYITCH.
,, THE INVADERS.
,, MY RELIGION.
,, LIFE.
,, MY CONFESSION.
,, CHILDHOOD, BOYHOOD, YOUTH.
,, THE PHYSIOLOGY OF WAR.
,, WHAT TO DO ?
,, THE LONG EXILE.
,, SEVASTOPOL.
,, THE KREUTZER SONATA.
,, THE KINGDOM OF GOD.
3/6 ANNA KARÉNINA.
,, WAR AND PEACE. (2 vols.)
1/- WHAT IS ART ?

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My Religion

TOLSTOY



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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE.

TO one not familiar with the Russian language the accessible data relative to the external life of Leo Nikolaevich Tolstoi, the author of this book, are, to say the least, not voluminous. His name does not appear in that heterogeneous record of celebrities known as *The Men of the Time*, nor is it to be found in M. Vapereau's comprehensive *Dictionnaire des Contemporains*. And yet Count Leo Tolstoi is acknowledged by competent critics to be a man of extraordinary genius, who, certainly in one instance, has produced a masterpiece of literature which will continue to rank with the great artistic productions of this age.

Perhaps it is enough for us to know that he was born on his father's estate in the Russian province of Tula, in the year 1828; that he received a good home education and studied the oriental languages at the University of Kasan; that he was for a time in the army, which he entered at the age of twenty-three as an officer of artillery, serving later on the staff of Prince Gortschakof; and that subsequently he alternated between St. Petersburg and Moscow, leading the existence of super-refined barbarism

and excessive luxury, characteristic of the Russian aristocracy. He saw life in country and city, in camp and court. He was numbered among the defenders of Sebastopol in the Crimean War, and the impressions then gathered he used as material for a series of *War Sketches* that attracted attention in the pages of the magazine where they first appeared; and when, a little later, they were published in book form, their author, then twenty-eight years of age, acquired at once a wide popularity. Popularity became fame with the publication, also in 1856, of *Childhood and Youth*, remarkable alike for its artless revelations concerning the genesis and growth of ideas and emotions in the minds of the young, for its idyllic pictures of domestic life, and for its graceful descriptions of nature. This was followed by *The Cossacks*, a wild romance of the steppes, vigorously realistic in details, and, like all of Count Tolstoi's works, poetic in conception and inspired with a dramatic intensity. In 1860 appeared *War and Peace*, an historical romance in many volumes, dealing with the Napoleonic invasion of 1812 and the events that immediately followed the retreat from Moscow. According to M. C. Courrière,¹ it was seized upon with avidity and produced a profound sensation.

“The stage is immense and the actors are innumerable; among them three emperors with their ministers, their marshals, and their generals, and then a countless retinue of minor officers, sol-

¹ *Histoire de la littérature contemporaine en Russie.*

diers, nobles, and peasants. We are transported by turns from the salons of St. Petersburg to the camps of war, from Moscow to the country. And all these diverse and varied scenes are joined together with a controlling purpose that brings everything into harmony. Each one of the prolonged series of constantly changing tableaux is of remarkable beauty and palpitating with life."

Pierre Besushkof, one of the three heroes of *War and Peace*, has, rightly or wrongly, long been regarded as in some respects an autobiographical study, but the personal note is always clearly perceptible in Count Tolstoi's writings, if we are to believe the reports of the enthusiastic purveyors of literary information who have made known some of their many attractive qualities. It is plain also that a common purpose runs through them all, a purpose which only in the author's latest production finds full expression. There are hints of it in *Childhood and Youth*; in *War and Peace*, and in a subsequent romance, *Anna Karenin*, it becomes very distinct. In the two works last named Count Tolstoi is pitiless in his portrayal of the vices and follies of the wealthy, aristocratic class, and warm in his praise of simplicity and unpretending virtue. Pierre Besushkof is represented as the product of a transition period, one who sees clearly that the future must be different from the past, but unable to interpret the prophecies of its coming. M. Courrière speaks of him very happily as "an overgrown child who seems to be lost in a wholly unfamiliar world." For a

time Pierre finds mental tranquillity in the tenets of freemasonry, and the author gives us a vivid account, humorous and pathetic by turns, of the young man's efforts to carry the newly acquired doctrines into practice. He determines to better the condition of the peasants on his estates; but instead of looking after the affair himself, he leaves the consummation of his plans to his stewards, with the result that "the cleverest among them listened with attention, but considered one thing only, — how to carry out their own private ends under the pretence of executing his commands." Later on we are shown Pierre wandering aimlessly about the streets of burning Moscow, until taken into custody by the French. Then he learns the true meaning of life from a simple soldier, a fellow-prisoner, and thereby realizes that safety for the future is to be obtained only by bringing life to the standard of rude simplicity adopted by the common people, by recognizing, in act as well as in deed, the brotherhood of man.

We cannot here enter into the question as to whether this mental attitude, by no means unusual among Russians of cultivation and liberality, arises from the lack of social gradation between the noble and the peasant, which forces the social philosopher of rank to accept an existence of pure worldliness and empty show, or to adopt the primitive aspirations and humble toil of the tillers of the soil. At any rate, it is plain that Count Tolstoi sides with the latter. The doctrine of simplification has many

adherents in Russia, and when, some time ago, it was announced that the author of *War and Peace* had retired to the country and was leading a life of frugality and unaffected toil in the cultivation of his estates, the surprise to his own countrymen could not have been very great. In this book he tells us how the decision was formed. He bases his conclusions on a direct and literal interpretation of the teachings of Jesus as expressed in the Sermon on the Mount.

The interpretation is not new in theory, but never before has it been carried out with so much zeal, so much determination, so much sincerity, and, granting the premises, with logic so unanswerable, as in this beautiful confession of faith. How movingly does he depict the doubts and fears of the searcher after the better life; how impressive his earnest inquiry for truth; how inspiring his confidence in the natural goodness, as opposed to the natural depravity of man; how convincing his argument that the doctrine of Jesus is simple, practicable, and conducive to the highest happiness; how terrifying his enumeration of the sufferings of "the martyrs to the doctrine of the world"; how pitiless his arraignment of the Church for its complacent indifference to the welfare of humanity here in this present stage of existence; how sublime his prophecy of the golden age when men shall dwell together in the bonds of love, and sin and suffering shall be no more the common lot of mankind! We read, and are thrilled with a divine emotion; but which

of us is willing to accept the truth here unfolded as the veritable secret of life?

Shall we take seriously this eloquent enunciation of faith in humility, in self-denial, in fraternal love, or shall we regard it only as a beautiful and peaceful phase in the career of a man of genius who, after the storm and stress of a life of sin and suffering, has turned back to the ideals of youth and innocence, and sought to make them once more the objects of desire? Fanaticism, do you say? Ah, yes; but did not Jesus and his disciples practise just such fanaticism as this? Does any one deny that all that is best in this modern world (and there is so much of the best, after all), that all that is best has come from the great moral impulse generated by a little group of fanatics in an obscure corner of Asia eighteen centuries ago? That impulse we still feel, in spite of all the obstructions that have been put in its way to nullify its action; and if any would seek for strength from the primary source of power, who shall say him nay? And so although we may smile at the artlessness of this Russian evangelist in his determination to find in the gospels the categorical imperative of self-renunciation, although we may regard with wonder the magnificent audacity of his exegetical speculations, we cannot refuse to admire a faith so sincere, so intense, and, in many respects, so elevating and so noble.

HUNTINGTON SMITH.

INTRODUCTION.



I HAVE not always been possessed of the religious ideas set forth in this book. For thirty-five years of my life I was, in the proper acceptation of the word, a nihilist, — not a revolutionary socialist, but a man who believed in nothing. Five years ago faith came to me ; I believed in the doctrine of Jesus, and my whole life underwent a sudden transformation. What I had once wished for I wished for no longer, and I began to desire what I had never desired before. What had once appeared to me right now became wrong, and the wrong of the past I beheld as right. My condition was like that of a man who goes forth upon some errand, and having traversed a portion of the road, decides that the matter is of no importance, and turns back. What was at first on his right hand is now on his left, and what was at his left hand is now on his right ; instead of going away from his abode, he desires to get back to it as soon as possible. My life and my desires were completely changed ; good

and evil interchanged meanings. Why so? Because I understood the doctrine of Jesus in a different way from that in which I had understood it before.

It is not my purpose to expound the doctrine of Jesus; I wish only to tell how it was that I came to understand what there is in this doctrine that is simple, clear, evident, indisputable; how I understand that part of it which appeals to all men, and how this understanding refreshed my soul and gave me happiness and peace.

I do not intend to comment on the doctrine of Jesus; I desire only that all comment shall be forever done away with. The Christian sects have always maintained that all men, however unequal in education and intelligence, are equal before God; that divine truth is accessible to every one. Jesus has even declared it to be the will of God that what is concealed from the wise shall be revealed to the simple. Not every one is able to understand the mysteries of dogmatics, homiletics, liturgics, hermeneutics, apologetics; but every one is able and ought to understand what Jesus Christ said to the millions of simple and ignorant people who have lived, and who are living to-day. Now, the things that Jesus said to simple people who could not avail themselves of the comments of Paul, of Clement, of

Chrysostom, and of others, are just what I did not understand, and which, now that I have come to understand them, I wish to make plain to all.

The thief on the cross believed in the Christ, and was saved. If the thief, instead of dying on the cross, had descended from it, and told all men of his belief in the Christ, would not the result have been of great good? Like the thief on the cross, I believe in the doctrine of Jesus, and this belief has made me whole. This is not a vain comparison, but a truthful expression of my spiritual condition; my soul, once filled with despair of life and fear of death, is now full of happiness and peace.

Like the thief, I knew that my past and present life was vile; I saw that the majority of men about me lived unworthy lives. I knew, like the thief, that I was wretched and suffering, that all those about me suffered and were wretched; and I saw before me nothing but death to save me from this condition. As the thief was nailed to his cross, so I was nailed to a life of suffering and evil by an incomprehensible power. And as the thief saw before him, after the sufferings of a foolish life, the horrible shadows of death, so I beheld the same vista opening before me.

In all this I felt that I was like the thief. There

was, however, a difference in our conditions; he was about to die, and I—I still lived. The dying thief thought perhaps to find his salvation beyond the grave, while I had before me life and its mystery this side the grave. I understood nothing of this life; it seemed to me a frightful thing, and then—I understood the words of Jesus, and life and death ceased to be evil; instead of despair, I tasted joy and happiness that death could not take away.

Will any one, then, be offended if I tell the story of how all this came about?

LEO TOLSTOI.

Moscow, Jan. 23, 1384.

APPENDIX.

WHEN Count Tolstoi speaks of the Church and its dogmas, he refers especially, of course, to the Orthodox Greek Church, the national church of Russia. The following summary of the teachings of the Orthodox Greek Church is taken from Prof. T. M. Lindsay's article in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, ninth edition, volume xi. p. 158. Variations from the Roman Catholic doctrine are indicated by small capitals, and variations from Protestant doctrine by italics. [Tr.]

“Christianity is a divine revelation, communicated to mankind through Christ; its saving truths are to be learned from the Bible *and tradition*, the former having been written, *and the latter maintained uncorrupted* through the influence of the Holy Spirit; *the interpretation of the Bible belongs to the Church, which is taught by the Holy Spirit*, but every believer may read the Scriptures.

“According to the Christian revelation, God is a trinity, that is, the divine essence exists in three persons, perfectly equal in nature and dignity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; **THE HOLY GHOST PROCEEDS FROM THE FATHER ONLY.** Besides

the triune God, there is no other object of divine worship, *but homage (ὑπερδουλία) may be paid to the Virgin Mary, and reverence (δουλία) to the saints and to their pictures and relics.*

“Man is born with a corrupt bias, which was not his at creation; the first man, when created, possessed IMMORTALITY, PERFECT WISDOM, AND A WILL REGULATED BY REASON. Through the first sin, Adam and his posterity lost IMMORTALITY, AND HIS WILL RECEIVED A BIAS TOWARDS EVIL. In this natural state, man, who, even before he actually sins, is a sinner before God by original or inherited sin, commits manifold actual transgressions; *but he is not absolutely without power of will towards good, and is not always doing evil.*

“Christ, the Son of God, became man in two natures, which internally and inseparably united make One Person, and, according to the eternal purpose of God, has obtained for man reconciliation with God and eternal life, inasmuch as he, by his vicarious death has made satisfaction to God for the world's sins; and this satisfaction was PERFECTLY COMMENSURATE WITH THE SINS OF THE WORLD. Man is made partaker of reconciliation in spiritual regeneration, which he attains to, being led and kept by the Holy Ghost. This divine help is offered *to all men without distinction, and may be rejected.* In order to attain to salvation, man is justified, and, when so justified, CAN DO NO MORE THAN THE COMMANDS OF GOD. He may fall from this state of grace through mortal sin.

“Regeneration is offered by the word of God and in the sacraments, *which, under visible signs, communicate God’s invisible grace to Christians when administered cum intentione.* There are seven mysteries or sacraments. . Baptism *entirely destroys* original sin. In the Eucharist, the true body and blood of Christ are *substantially present, and the elements are changed into the substance of Christ, whose body and blood are corporeally partaken of by communicants.* . ALL Christians should receive the bread and the WINE. *The Eucharist is also an expiatory sacrifice.* The new birth when lost may be restored through repentance, which is not merely (1) sincere sorrow, but also (2) *confession of each individual sin to the priest, and (3) the discharge of penances imposed by the priest for the removal of the temporal punishment, which may have been imposed by God and the Church.* *Penance, accompanied by the judicial absolution of the priest, makes a true sacrament.*

“The Church of Christ is the fellowship of ALL THOSE WHO ACCEPT AND PROFESS ALL THE ARTICLES OF FAITH TRANSMITTED BY THE APOSTLES, AND APPROVED BY GENERAL SYNODS. *Without this visible Church there is no salvation.* It is under the abiding influence of the Holy Ghost, and *therefore cannot err in matters of faith.* Specially appointed persons are necessary in the service of the Church, *and they form a threefold order, distinct jure divino from other Christians, of Bishops, Priests, and Deacons.* THE FOUR PATRIARCHS OF EQUAL DIGNITY HAVE THE

HIGHEST RANK AMONG THE BISHOPS, AND THE BISHOPS united in a General Council represent the Church and infallibly decide, under the guidance of the Holy Ghost, all matters of faith and ecclesiastical life. All ministers of Christ must be regularly called and appointed to their office, and are consecrated by the sacrament of orders. Bishops must be unmarried, and PRIESTS AND DEACONS MUST NOT CONTRACT A SECOND MARRIAGE. To all priests in common belongs, besides the preaching of the word, the administration of the SIX SACRAMENTS, — BAPTISM, CONFIRMATION, PENANCE, EUCHARIST, MATRIMONY, UNCTION OF THE SICK. The bishops alone can administer the sacrament of orders.

“Ecclesiastical ceremonies are part of the divine service; most of them have apostolic origin; and those connected with the sacrament must not be omitted by priests under pain of mortal sin.”

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