Reviews

Dragan Milivojevic. *Leo Tolstoy and The Oriental Religious Heritage.* East European Monographs, Boulder, CO; Distributed by Columbia University Press, 1998. Pp. 182.

This book is not what it seems, which is perhaps appropriate for a work which deals with Tolstoy's relationship to Asian thought, mainly to what in the West is called Buddhism. The genre is best described as a potpourri, a collection of eight essays by various authors, six of which were previously published, accompanied by translations of some works treating mainly Buddhist themes which were written or edited or approved or introduced by Tolstoy. Professor Milivojevic is the editor of the volume, the author of four of the essays, and the translator of all the "Tolstoyan" texts. In his short introduction to the volume, Milivojevic stresses that the book deals mainly with "the influence of and parallels between Oriental religions and Tolstoy's concept of religion and philosophy"(i).

The four articles treating Buddhism range from Milivojevic's general essay on "Tolstoy's Views on Buddhism," previously published in *TSJ* (111, 1990), to H. H. Walsh's study of the candle image in *Anna Karenina* in relation to the "false" etymology of the root of the word *nirvana.* Two of the remaining articles treat Taoism, one in relationship to *War and Peace,* the other in relationship to Tolstoy's general views; the other two articles treat Tolstoy and Hinduism, one entitled "The 'Indian' in Tolstoy," written authoritatively by A. Syrkin, but published here only in part, the second half of an essay which refers back to the missing first half. The articles are printed in what seems a random order, beginning with Tolstoy on Buddhism, then jumping to two studies of *War and Peace,* one Taoist, one Buddhist, then the essay on *Anna Karenina,* followed by three articles on various themes, and closing with Syrkin's study which treats the theme of *ukhod* as it surfaces in the later Tolstoy and in relationship to Hinduism. The articles are followed by translations of several versions of the life of Buddha, two stories with Buddhist themes, "Kunala's Eyes" and "It is You," and finally, somewhat incongruously, a short essay on Mo-Ti (here referred to as Mi-Ti, thus transliterating the Russian) which was edited but not written by Tolstoy.

A reader unfamiliar with Asian thought, especially Taoism and Buddhism, will have difficulty making intelligent use of the material in this book. First of all there are fundamental misstatements, as for example when Milivojevic claims that "Tolstoy adopted the Buddhist concept of Karma in its totality" (1). Tolstoy certainly understood the concept of karma, as Milivojevic knows, since he quotes Tolstoy's own not incorrect definition of it: "Karma is a Buddhist belief that not only the character mold of each person but also all his fate in this life is a consequence of his or her actions in a previous life" (9, n. 29). I know of nothing that would suggest that Tolstoy believed in former lives at least in this sense. What attracted Tolstoy to the concept of karma was the notion that we are shaped by our previous actions (good or bad) in this life. All the metaphysical assumptions associated with karma, including not only previous lives but also reincarnation, were simply quite alien to the rationalist Tolstoy, for whom karma is a psychological and moral concept.

In such a book as this the concept of *nirvana* is bound to play a central role. Yet an uninitiated reader might have trouble grasping the meaning of this complex, multivalent concept/state/experience and the "parallels" one might find in Tolstoy. Milivojevic and Walsh are most helpful in their elucidation of the understanding of *nirvana* in the nineteenth-century Western studies known to Tolstoy, as well as in clarifying the mediating role played by Schopenhauer. Tolstoy's "pessimistic" reading of *nirvana* (and hence of Buddhism) in *Confession* stems from his reliance on these

sources. Milivojevic and Walsh are not completely wrong in stressing that the version of Buddhism most known in the nineteenth-century West (Theravada) understood *nirvana* mainly as a state of "extinction," liberation from *samsara,* the toils and troubles of this life, although even this tradition is more subtle in its conception of the state of liberation. But if we are seeking parallels between Tolstoy and Buddhist experience, then the notion of *nirvana* in the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions of Buddhism (the traditions that existed within and near the territory of Imperial Russia) would seem most relevant. In these traditions, albeit described in a variety of ways, *nirvana is* conceived as oneness with the absolute, the bliss in experiencing one's identity with a transcendent compassion for all reality. Such a conception, it seems to me, is quite close to Tolstoy's sense of oneness with the All so often elaborated in his diaries.

Studies that explore "influences and parallels" inevitably run into complex methodological problems. In some cases, as in Milivojevic's "Some Buddhist Inklings in Prince Andrei and Pierre Bezukhov in *War and Peace*," it is clear that the author discovers parallels by a process of interpretive reading, in this instance of several scenes from the novel in conjunction with concepts from a certain school of Zen Buddhism of which Tolstoy had no knowledge then or later. This is somewhat ironic, given that Zen Buddhism is precisely that school of Buddhism which most eschews concepts and words in favour of experience. Perhaps this explains why Milivojevic's argument in this article is difficult to follow. Be that as it may, what such parallelisms are meant to demonstrate is not completely clear. At best, it seems to me, such parallels prove a point that A. Syrkin makes quite clear: "Some of Tolstoy's character traits and some aspects of his mentality, which developed before his acquaintance with India and independently of it, could, to a certain degree, have motivated his later interests and aspirations which helped him to find the way to himself" (105). They also motivated, perhaps, his very interest in Asian religions and thought. Unless we believe in the "death of the author" and the reign of *écriture,* the starting point for such studies, however problematic this may be, still has to be what Tolstoy himself referred to as the "character of the author."

One feature of the "character of the author" Leo Tolstoy was that he was not so much influenced by something other as attracted by something he perceived as similar. At least in the area of Eastern thought Tolstoy read less to learn than to be affirmed. As in his reading of Christianity, Tolstoy rejected what made no sense to him and reworked materials and concepts in order to fit them into his own mould. This is well demonstrated in Bulanzhe's life of Buddha edited by Tolstoy and translated for this volume. The very title, "Life and Teaching of Siddhartha Gautama Called the Buddha, That Is, The Most Perfect [sic] One," demonstrates the process of reworking: Buddha is taken to mean not "the awakened one," as the original Sanskrit and Pali word should be translated, but "the perfect one" *(sovershenei-shii),* thereby fitting the Buddha into Tolstoy's earliest mentality of perfectionism which he later wrote into his interpretation of Christianity. Furthermore, in this life of Buddha the Tolstoyan notion of "reason" replaces the Buddhist notions of "consciousness" *(prajna)* and "enlightenment" *(bodhi)* and the Tolstoyan concern for the "true life" replaces the law or path *(dharma)* and liberation from suffering *(nirvana).* It is not surprising, then, that the last of the Buddhist Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path that leads to *nirvana* is transformed into five "commandments" which have a decidedly Tolstoyan ring. The third commandment, "Do not commit adultery," for example, has little to do with the Buddhist notion of the avoidance of "sexual misconduct." In short Professor Milivojevic is absolutely correct when he baldly states that Tolstoy's "reading of Oriental religions was motivated by an attempt to find parallels to his own religious views which were based on his understanding of Christianity" (49).

Perhaps the most important role this book will play is in making clear the need for a focused exploration of Tolstoy and Buddhism. For the reader of Russian the general book by A. I Shifman, *Lev Tolstoi i vostok* (Moscow, 1971) still

remains the authoritative work on Tolstoy and Asian religions, even though the necessary Soviet biases somewhat blemish this fine scholarly study. In English we do have the still useful *Tolstoy and China* by Derk Bodde (Princeton, 1950). But on Buddhism, clearly the non-Christian "religious" worldview Tolstoy was most drawn to, there is no comprehensive study. Such a work would first of all trace Tolstoy's knowledge and interpretation of the Buddhist tradition. Here the issue of "influence" could be explored. It would also be most important to explore the context of Tolstoy's discovery of Buddhism, for unlike the Western scholars of his day, he lived in a country where Buddhism flourished among many of the non-Russian peoples, especially the Buryats and the Kalmyks. Many were educated in Russian universities, studied Buddhism in Mongolia and Tibet, and published books on the subject in Russian. (See John Snelling, *Buddhism in Russia,* Rockport, MA, 1993.) Leskov demonstrates his knowledge of this Buddhism in such a work as *Na kraiu sveta.* What did Tolstoy know of this? Finally it would be most interesting and revealing, I believe, to study the typological parallels between Tolstoy's Christianity and religious experience and the rich tradition of the many varieties of Buddhism. Such an approach would be most helpful to Western readers unfamiliar with this Asian tradition. What such a book would show, I believe, is that while Tolstoy believed Christianity to be the most important religion in the world, at least in his version of it, his version has in fact much in common with that ancient Asian religion which holds so much appeal to contemporary Europeans and North Americans.

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Lidiia D. Opul'skaia. *Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoi. Materialy k biografii s 1892 po 1899 god.* Moscow: Nasledie, 1998. Pp. 407.

Lidiia Dmitrievna Opul'skaia has long enjoyed a reputation, both at home and in the West, as the world's "dean" of Tolstoy studies. This book confirms yet again how well that reputation is deserved. There are no other scholars alive today, and precious few who ever lived, who have the exhaustive knowledge to comment authoritatively on the most minute details of Tolstoy's life.

During the period covered in the book, Tolstoy played an active role in public life. In his many pronouncements, he appealed, like many other contemporary writers, to people's self-awareness, to reason and the moral sense of the individual, to humanity's aspirations toward spiritual values. Russia was going through turbulent times: famines, so-called "cholera uprisings," growing labour unrest, the formation of Marxist circles, the setting up of a labour union in Moscow, the establishment of a "union for struggle for the liberation of the working class" in St. Petersburg (1894), the Doukhobors' burning of arms in the Caucasus (1895) and their refusal to do military service, student unrest (1896), and the resulting historic national student strike (1899), the persecution of Doukhobors and their mass exodus from Russia (1899), and the growth of other religious sects, likewise repressed by the authorities and the official church. Tolstoy responded to such calamities both as a writer and a human being. He not only penned articles, treatises, and countless letters on these issues, but also organized famine relief, food kitchens, and aid for the starving peasants of Tula Province; he appealed to those well off to follow his own example of contributing money toward the Doukhobor emigration. And all this despite serious personal problems: the evident deterioration of his health, the death of his favourite son, Vanechka, and increasing tensions in his marriage. (On 7 March 1895 Sofia Andreevna wrote to her sister: "Levochka [as she called her husband] is completely overwhelmed, he has aged, he walks around bright-eyed but sad, and it is apparent that the last bright ray of his old age