
Rousseau's God and Tolstoy's

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The above title may strike readers as scandalously heretical: most of us, as heirs of the Judeo-Christian tradition, know that God is one.¹ My intent, however, is not to propagate a ditheistic or Manichaean heresy, but merely to symbolize a move from the (quasi-)objective realm of theology to the subjective one of psychology. My premise is simply this: all of us, Rousseau and Tolstoy included, use whatever God or gods we may have to serve our own intellectual and emotional needs. My aim is therefore to seek whatever illumination may emerge from a comparison of the ways each of these two great thinkers used his own private, internal God.

The comparison is not purely arbitrary; there is a strong genetic connection between the two. The importance of Rousseau as a formative influence on Tolstoy's ideas on many subjects, among them religion, has been clearly attested by Tolstoy himself:

Rousseau has been my master since the age of fifteen [he wrote in 1905]. Rousseau and the Gospel have been the two great and beneficent influences of my life. Rousseau does not age. Quite recently I happened to reread several of his works, and I experienced the same feeling of spiritual uplift and of admiration that I experienced reading him in my first youth.²

Earlier he told Paul Boyer:

I read all of Rousseau, all twenty volumes, including the *Dictionary of Music*. I did more than venerate him; I formed a real Rousseau cult. I wore his portrait around my neck like a holy image.³

Such veneration is all the more surprising in that by temperament Tolstoy was anything but a hero-worshipper. He tended to regard all canonical lofty reputations with fierce skepticism and during his life shot down and contemptuously cast into his commodious cultural rubbish heap such seemingly sacrosanct master spirits of Western civilization as Shakespeare, Dante, Goethe, Bach, Beethoven, and Raphael.⁴ But Rousseau was the exception. Rousseau was even used as a personal measuring-rod. "I am reading Rousseau," Tolstoy wrote in 1852, "and I feel how much higher he stands than I do in education and talent, but lower in self-respect, firmness, and rationality" (15 July 1852; *SS* 19:98-99).⁵

To compare in full detail the religious views of Rousseau and Tolstoy, would be a vast topic, far too large for the space available to me here.⁶ I will therefore begin by simply highlighting a few crucial similarities and differences in the two men's religious *ideas*. My ultimate aim, however, is to try to elucidate the *emotional* relationship of each to the being they called God: what did God mean to each of them, why did they need Him, and to what uses did they put Him?

The religious evolution of both Rousseau and Tolstoy was marked by years of restless searching, with many twists, turns, and reversals of direction. Born in Geneva, Rousseau was brought up as a Calvinist Protestant. Formally converted to Roman Catholicism at age sixteen, largely for opportunistic reasons, he remained at least nominally a Catholic during his years of self-education under the cozy wing of his seductive sponsor, Mme. de Warens, his adored "Maman." But after his move to Paris and association with the *philosophes*, Rousseau's connection not only with the Church, but even with Christianity itself, at least as most believers would define it, was essentially sloughed off. To be sure, in one of his periods of conflict with the French establishment he did for a time proudly reclaim his Protestant Swiss birthright; but before long he found the Protestant clergy as dogmatic and intolerant as their Catholic confrères and renounced them in turn.⁷

Rousseau never embraced the complete atheism of his sometime friends Diderot, Helvétius, Holbach, and La Mettrie, nor did he share Voltaire's bitter animus against the Church as an institution. He also retained a deep admiration for

the human personality of Jesus, who, he felt, had propagated lofty ideals in a debased milieu and had borne with dignity the sufferings of an ignominious death. But despite his differences with the *philosophes*, Rousseau remained very much a product of the rationalist Enlightenment. He emphatically repudiated *all* the central tenets of official—ecclesiastical—Christianity: Rousseau's Jesus was *not* an incarnate deity; he did *not* perform miracles; he did *not* rise from the dead; and his death was *not* a payment needed to redeem mankind from original sin.⁸ In all these views Tolstoy was very much in accord with his Franco-Swiss mentor, except that the late Tolstoy placed much more emphasis than Rousseau did on the moral teachings of Jesus as set forth in the Sermon on the Mount.⁹

Rousseau retained a firm faith in the existence of God and in the immortality of the human soul—two basic tenets also fairly consistently shared by Tolstoy throughout his life, though Tolstoy suffered more agonizing doubts on both counts than Rousseau did, and his view of immortality, particularly in his later years, was of a more Buddhist-like, impersonal blending of the individual soul with the ultimate One than the complete survival of personality pictured by Rousseau.¹⁰ Rousseau insisted that the existence of God is demonstrated by the universe He created, for it is impossible to explain the orderliness of the natural world without postulating an intelligent Being who formed it. Rousseau's God is good, and the universe He created is also good. The world is orderly and beautiful; all sin and disorder are of human making.

A good God must by definition be *just*; justice is one of the necessary attributes of an inherently orderly world. A just God could not favor certain peoples over others, hence Rousseau's rejection of Judaism, nor could He damn to perdition the millions of people in Africa, Asia, and the Americas whose only crime was that they had never heard of Jesus and His salvific sacrifice. The doctrine of original sin is likewise unjust: how can we be blamed for being born? Furthermore, Rousseau's conviction of the fundamental equality and goodness of all people bore the corollary belief that God has implanted in every human heart a

basic understanding of right and wrong, good and evil, an innate conscience that lies at the foundation of the "natural" religion which could and should unite all men if only they would stop bickering over insoluble mysteries of theology or technicalities of ritual. This belief is very close to Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You*: the moral principles preached by Jesus are already latent in every human being; we need only listen to the voice of God within us. God does not care, Rousseau asserted, about what words are said by a priest before an altar, nor how many genuflections he makes. God cares only about what lies in our hearts.¹¹ These views were fully shared by Tolstoy, who in his later years was even more vehement in his fulminations against the sorcery and ritualism of the priests, culminating in the famous "defamiliarized" satirical representation of the Orthodox liturgy in *Resurrection*.

Unlike the late Tolstoy, Rousseau acknowledged a certain place for formal religion as an element of cultural unity in a particular country; he did not object to the notion that all a king's subjects should at least formally share his faith. Thus even late in his life Rousseau was willing to attend mass, just as his very unorthodox Vicaire savoyard was willing to celebrate it, simply to mark his membership in French society. But of course Rousseau did not believe a word of what was said during that mass, including its central mystery, the transubstantiation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ.¹² Thus Rousseau in his mature period had only very loose and formal ties with Christianity. Though still living in a nominally Christian society and conforming to some of its traditional customs, he had essentially moved past Christianity to advocacy of a "natural" universal faith.

We can draw the obvious parallels with Tolstoy's religious biography, so vividly set forth for us in his *Isповед'* (a title obviously inspired by Rousseau's *Confessions*).¹³ Brought up as a child within the Orthodox Church, Tolstoy performed whatever religious observances were expected of him, but without deep involvement or conviction. By the age of fifteen, perhaps already under Rousseau's influence, Tolstoy had ceased to observe the fasts or go to church. In the *Confession* he claims

that all his middle years, up to the crisis of the late 1870s, were spent in this state of religious indifference, though his diaries do not entirely confirm this assertion. Like Rousseau, he retained a belief in the existence of God, though he was assailed by periods of doubt. For instance, his diary entry for 7/19 March 1857 laments, "Last night I was tormented by the sudden appearance of doubts about *everything*" (PSS 47:118). Earlier, in 1853, he had given the doubts logical underpinning:

I cannot prove to myself the existence of God, I find no effective proof of it, and I find the concept unnecessary. It is easier and simpler to conceive of a world that has existed eternally with its unutterably splendid orderliness than of a Being who created it. (8 July 1853; PSS 46:167)

Just before writing this apparent apologia of atheism, incidentally, Tolstoy had again been reading the *Profession du foi du Vicaire savoyard*. "As always after such reading," he adds modestly, "I conceived a mass of effective and noble thoughts. Yes, my largest misfortune is my big intellect (*bol'shoi um*)" (8 July 1853; PSS 46:167).¹⁴ In 1857, sojourning in Rousseau's Switzerland, Tolstoy is affected, as he often was, by the beauty of the night.

A marvel of a night And not to believe in the immortality of the soul, when you feel in your soul such immeasurable greatness. I looked out the window. It was black, broken, and light. What's the use of living? My God! My God! What am I? Where am I? And where am I going? (7 July 1857; PSS 47:141)

But by 1860 Tolstoy had reasoned his way to belief in a rather impersonal, deistic God:

To whom can one pray? What sort of God is it that one can represent to oneself clearly enough to supplicate Him, communicate with Him? If I do represent such a God to myself, he loses all greatness for me. A God who can be supplicated and served is an expression of weakness of mind. What makes Him God is that I cannot conceive of his whole being. And He is not a Being, he is law and power. (1 February 1860; PSS 48:23)

Although, as we shall see, in his prayers Tolstoy addresses God as "Father" and seems to assume a personal relationship, in his moments of more severe rationalism he suspects himself—and others—of anthropomorphic projection. The only God we can be sure of is the law and will (*zakon, volia*) to which we are called upon to submit (30 March 1902: PSS 54:128).

Only after his crisis of the late 1870s did Tolstoy turn decisively back to Christianity. He first attempted to reembrace the Orthodox Church, but now on typically Tolstoyan "repentant nobleman" grounds. The peasants must know best since they are peasants, and the peasants are Orthodox believers. (The plebeian Rousseau, incidentally, felt no such reverence for the superstitions of the *bas peuple*.) But when he actually examined systematically the theology of the Orthodox Church as taught to its clergy, Tolstoy's rationalist mind, perhaps shaped partly by his readings of Rousseau, revolted. Everything the Orthodox were supposed to believe was absurd, beginning with the Trinity: how could anything be one and three at the same time? He inveighs against this absurdity again and again.¹⁵

Yet as we have seen, Tolstoy still ranked the Gospels alongside Rousseau as his deepest spiritual influences. But the Gospels whose wisdom Tolstoy cherished were not the Gospels of the miracle cures, the marriage at Cana or the resurrection of Lazarus—violations of the natural order that Rousseau also found unacceptable, despite his admiration for the Gospels as a whole. Indeed, the resurrection miracles offended Tolstoy's very Rousseauistic sense of justice: why resurrect just Lazarus and not John or Joan? It was the Sermon on the Mount, with its crucial passage, *I say unto you, that ye resist not evil* (Matt 5:39), that Tolstoy placed as the very keystone of his teaching. This was the deepest and most fundamental message Tolstoy wanted to preach to the world; and he insisted that it was, or should be, the essence of Christianity, since these were words uttered by Christ Himself in His most fully articulated statement of His teachings.

Thus Tolstoy's aim in the latter part of his life was quite different from any pursued by Rousseau. Tolstoy's purpose was to renovate Christianity, to

purge it, to restore a pure "Jesus" Christianity, freed from all the lies and priestly encrustations of the ages, beginning with those imposed by that great traducer and distorter of the message of Jesus, St. Paul. Only very late in his life, after much reading in the scriptures of other faiths, did Tolstoy come around to a universalist position more like Rousseau's. He then found affinities between his Christian views and moral truths propagated by most of the great religions, especially Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, and he hoped for a universal brotherhood that would transcend all religious labels.¹⁶

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After this brief summary I turn to a more speculative attempt to assess the emotional underpinnings of these beliefs in both men.

One is struck at once by certain marked similarities in their life experiences. Each lost his mother at a very early age, too early to have any memory of her. Both fathers were a poor substitute for the lost mothers; in both cases relations between father and son were on the whole friendly and benign, but far from close. Tolstoy, whose father also died when he was only nine, was much better compensated for the loss of his parents than Rousseau—by his siblings, extended family, various aunts and mother-surrogates, and by his gentry status and inherited wealth. Rousseau's sense of isolation and abandonment remained acute, in his late years degenerating into real clinical paranoia. Of course, Rousseau really did at times experience real persecution, but the atmosphere evoked in the late *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* is a nightmarish one of a person beset from all sides by fiendish plots and diabolical intrigues. As Byron put it,

His life was one long war with self-sought foes
Or friends by him self-banished; for his mind
Had grown Suspicion's sanctuary....("Childe
Harold's Pilgrimage," III, 18 [1816])

The God who serves Rousseau's emotional needs is more than the abstract principle of will, order, and virtue postulated in his philosophical works as

permeating the universe. In his anguished isolation Rousseau longs for a more personal God, a paternal God of justice who will recognize his goodness and vindicate him. It is to this God he appeals in the famous opening paragraph of the *Confessions*:

. . . I shall . . . with this work in my hand . . . present myself before my Sovereign Judge. . . . I have displayed myself as I was, as vile and despicable when my behavior was such, as good, generous, and noble when I was so. I have bared my secret soul as Thou hast seen it, Eternal Being! So let the numberless legion of my fellow men gather around me, and hear my confessions. . . . Then let each of them in turn reveal, with the same frankness, the secrets of his heart at the foot of Thy throne and say if he dare, "I was better than that man."¹⁷

Rousseau puts it in italics: *Je fus meilleur que cet homme-là*. Obviously, no one will dare.

What seems to me remarkable here is Rousseau's complete sureness: a sublime self-confidence that actually marked his entire life, making it possible for him to take on the world, as it were, with the full certainty that he was right and the world wrong. His fundamental, life-long existential stance was to place himself, his feelings, his *heart* as the most authentic reality, the ultimate source of truth and value. Thus standing before God at the Last Judgment, he is completely sure that he is not only no worse than any other person, but in fact better, since he has been more honest than they. He has confessed his sins, at least some of them.¹⁸ However, I sense very little real contrition in Rousseau's *Confessions*. The confessed sins were errors of immaturity and growth, and he has corrected them by his own efforts. He now stands before God proud of himself and his success. Perhaps surprisingly, Rousseau does not extend his scene of ultimate vindication to include a satisfying punishment imposed by God on his enemies. Apparently, his belief in the Lord's goodness and mercy was too strong to permit this bit of imaginative self-indulgence. He always insisted that a God "who condemns to eternal torments the majority of His creatures is not the good and peaceful God my reason has demonstrated to me."¹⁹

I discern much the same pattern in Tolstoy's *Ispoved'*. Indeed, the similarity is more than literary, but stems from a profound similarity of these two men in personality, in basic attitude toward themselves and the world. Like Rousseau, Tolstoy was sublimely self-confident, insistent on thinking things through for himself, suspicious of all authorities and received opinions, willing to take on the whole world and set it right. Tolstoy's *Confession* also seems to me to lack any real contrition. He says he has committed all possible crimes, from adultery to murder, but he gives very little detail about them:

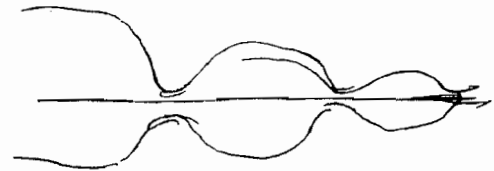
I killed men in war, I challenged them to duels in order to kill them. I lost at cards and consumed the labor of peasants. I punished them, fornicated, deceived. Falsehood, robbery, adultery of all types, drunkenness, violence, murder. There was no crime I did not commit, and for all this I was praised. My coevals considered and consider me a comparatively moral person. (SS 16:98)

Even here the thrust of his discourse is to place the blame on the milieu, on the ubiquitous "they" (that wonderful Russian third person plural verb without any subject!) who implanted false values in him and actively discouraged his striving for truth and goodness. Tolstoy, however, had none of Rousseau's paranoia. He does not look forward to a scene of triumphant vindication after death, and he issues no such bitter challenge to his fellow men as Rousseau's defiant dare to anyone who might venture to claim moral superiority over him. Indeed, Tolstoy does not seem much interested in any version of the Last Judgment, as some sort of reckoning performed by God with assignment of rewards and punishments.

The idea of metempsychosis, so charmingly articulated by Natasha Rostova in *War and Peace*, had been with Tolstoy for a long time. The idea of a "one-directional immortality" (from death onwards), as embraced by official Christianity and even by Rousseau's Vicaire Savoyard, seemed to him absurd: if our souls live eternally after death, they must have lived eternally before birth as well. As early as 1852, rereading the Vicaire's *Profession du foi*, Tolstoy found it

full of contradictions, unclear and abstract passages along with ones of extraordinary beauty. All I got out of it was a conviction of the non-immortality of the soul. If the concept of immortality requires that we remember a previous life, then we are not immortal. But my mind refuses to comprehend immortality from one end. (29 June 1852; PSS 46:128)

In a diary entry of 24 January 1894 Tolstoy offers a diagram of the process of "double-ended immortality":



The straight line is God [he explains]. The narrow places are the approach to death and birth. In those places God is closer. He is not hidden by anything. But in the middle of life he is obscured by the complexity of life. Lord, take me, teach me, enter into me. Be me. Or destroy me: without Thee it is not that I do not want to live, I cannot live. Father! (PSS 52:110)

Later Tolstoy overcomes the problem of our failure to remember our previous existence by postulating that the kind of consciousness we enjoy here on earth is specific to our animal nature here. Our life after death (and also, presumably, before birth) will lack personality, individuality. We were and will be fused with the deity in a state to which the earthly concepts of space and time are inapplicable:

The essence of Christ's teaching [he wrote in 1895] is that man . . . should understand that he, he himself, was never born and never died but always is and in this world passes through only one of the countless forms of life to fulfill the will of the One who sent him into this life. (7 December 1895; PSS 53:75)

Though prayer plays an important part in the relations with God of both our confessors, their prayers are never truly penitential, pleas for forgiveness. Clearly, they have already forgiven

themselves, and God is given little choice in the matter. Their prayers serve other functions. Both also consistently reject the most common human prayer, the plea for some special benefit or concession. An omniscient and benevolent God, they insist, already knows what we require and will provide for us; He has no need of our instructions. It is presumptuous and childish to plead for favors, which if granted would disrupt the divine order. The Vicaire savoyard prays simply in order to adore the wise Author of the universe. "I am moved by His benefactions and I bless Him for his gifts," he says.²⁰ And in *The Confessions* Rousseau recalls the delight of praying in the midst of nature's beauties, simply thanking God for the joy of being alive, a sentient part of His superb creation:

I got up every morning before sunrise and climbed through a near-by orchard. . . . As I walked up there I said my prayers, which did not consist of a vain motion of the lips but of a sincere raising of the heart towards the Creator of that beautiful Nature whose charms lay beneath my eyes. I have never liked to pray in a room; walls and all the little works of man come between myself and God. I love to contemplate Him in His works, while my heart uplifts to Him. I venture to say that my prayers were pure, and for that reason deserved to be heard. (*The Confessions* 225)

Rousseau does, however, allow himself after all to make some modest requests, though none that demand any special intervention on God's part, let alone suspension of the laws of nature:

For myself and for her whom I always remembered in them [i.e., Mme. de Warens], I asked no more than an innocent and peaceful life, free from all wickedness, grief, and distressing want, and that we should die the death of the just, and share their fate in the hereafter.

He does, to be sure, qualify the plea with the recognition that the best way of obtaining these benefits is not to ask for them, but to deserve them (*The Confessions* 225).

In Rousseau's case almost our only data for speculating about his religious feelings come from his published writings.²¹ With Tolstoy, on the other

hand, we have the diaries, for our purposes a precious source of insight into their author's feelings about God, especially since he often incorporates into it actual prayers. What were these feelings? One is reminded of a famous image evoked in Gorky's memoir on Tolstoy: "With God he has ill-defined relations, but sometimes they remind me of the relations of two bears in one den" (14:261). After the evidence of Tolstoy's diaries, early and late, however, I conclude that Gorky's image is misleading. The two bears metaphor, however picturesque, does not seem to me at all to convey the nature of Tolstoy's relationship with the deity. Tolstoy was not a *bogoborets*, a God-fighter, like several of Dostoevsky's characters. He does not argue with God or threaten Him, like Kirillov in *The Devils* nor blame Him for the moral disorder in the universe, like Ivan Karamazov.

There was, to be sure, at least one moment in his life when Tolstoy did shake his fist at the heavens, a burst of cosmic rage after the death of his beloved brother Nikolai in 1860.

What's the use of anything [he exclaimed in a letter to Fet] when tomorrow the torments of death may begin. . . . What a funny joke! Be useful, be virtuous, be happy while you live, we and other people have been saying to one another for centuries; and happiness and virtue and usefulness lie in truth, and the truth which I have extracted from my 32 years is that the situation in which someone has placed us is the most terrible deception and crime, one for which we (we liberals) would not find words if a human being had placed another in such a situation. Praise Allah, God, Brahma! What a benefactor! (17/29 October 1860; *PSS* 60:357-58)

One would have thought that the death in 1895 from scarlet fever of his seven-year-old son Vanichka might have provoked outrage in Tolstoy similar to that he had felt at his brother's passing thirty-five years earlier. Vanichka was the adored child of his and Sofya Andreevna's old age, evidently an exceptionally loving and promising boy. The loss was devastating to both of them. But though he himself connected the two events, the late Tolstoy cannot allow himself to blame God:

We buried Vanichka. It was terrible—no, not terrible, but a great spiritual event. I thank Thee, Father, I thank Thee. . . . Vanichka's death was for me like Nikolenka's, no, to a much greater degree a manifestation of God, an approach to Him. And therefore I not only cannot say that it was a sad, melancholy event, but I say straight out that it was (joyous) [*radostnoe*]*—not joyous, that is a bad word, but an act of God's mercy, which dispels the falseness of life, an event which draws one to Him.* (26 February and 12 March 1895; *PSS* 53:10)

In general, Tolstoy's most frequent attitude in prayer seems genuinely humble. One might have thought that a man as proud and self-assured as Tolstoy would be unable to assume an attitude of humility even before God. Certainly his model Rousseau could hardly be described as humble: Rousseau as it were smiles at God and expects God to smile back, a mutual admiration society. But in the privacy of his diary Tolstoy repeatedly confesses to *weakness*, inadequacy. Feeling awkward and unattractive in the presence of women of his own class, Tolstoy in his youth even violated the Rousseauistic prohibition against asking God for favors. In one of his nocturnal moments of intense awareness, he begs the Lord to make him better looking: "I just looked at the sky. A glorious night. God have mercy on me. I am ugly. Let me be good-looking and happy. God have mercy" (25 August 1855; *PSS* 47:60). Later, after a repeated failure of nerve he begged God to help him screw up his courage to propose to his future wife, Sofya Bers: "Lord, help me, teach me," he pleads twice, for reinforcement even turning to the Mother of God, a personal, anthropomorphic deity he later emphatically repudiated (10 September 1862; *PSS* 48:44). By far the most frequent prayerful note in the diary is: Help me, give me strength. "Do not abandon me, Lord," he writes in 1853. "Teach me. Give me strength, decisiveness, and intelligence" (4 January 1853; *PSS* 46:156). It is a plea repeated again and again over the years. "Father, help me," he begs in 1888, troubled by his failure to win over his wife and family by love (25 January 1889; *PSS* 50:29). "I am sad, sad," he writes in 1892, appalled at the greed and strife displayed by his children when he undertook to renounce all his property rights. "Heavy-hearted. Father, help me. Have pity

on me. I do not know what I should do. Help me. Teach me to love" (5 July 1892; *PSS* 52:68). "Lord, help me," he writes in 1894, tormented by the ever-present contradiction he felt he had to live with: while advocating for others voluntary simplification of life to its basest fundamentals, Tolstoy himself continues to lead the comfortable life of a Russian gentleman, surrounded by a wife and family who share few of his spiritual aspirations. He would like to right the moral balance with some dramatic display of sacrifice, but voluntary self-abnegation, self-repudiation in the name of family love, was much more difficult. He had to endure the mockery of his critics and often the reproaches of his followers. "Teach me how to bear this cross. I keep preparing myself for the cross I know, for prison, the gallows, and this is quite different, a new one, and I don't know how to bear it" (24 January 1894; *PSS* 52:110).

In his moments of need Tolstoy obviously perceived God as a loving father who will hold out a hand, pull him out of his difficulties, and instill strength in him. But all too often his rationalist mind keeps undermining his belief. He knows that God cannot be conceived as a personality: that is the root of anthropomorphism.

One of the chief causes of the evil of our life is the belief, taught in our Christian world, in a crude, Jewish, personal God; whereas the chief feature (if one can use this expression) of God is that He is in no way limited and therefore is *not* personal. (18 December 1899; *PSS* 53:232)

Maybe God as the addressee of prayer does not even exist.

I love to address myself to God [he writes]. If there were no God, even so it would be good to address an impersonal void. In such address there is none of the weakness, vanity, desire to accommodate others and calculation almost inescapable when one addresses people. (25 November 1888; *PSS* 50:5)

And elsewhere Tolstoy suggests that in praying to God one is in fact simply addressing what is holy within oneself:

You pray to God. They say, to what God. How can you know that He hears you?

That God who is in me hears me, of that there can be no doubt.

Then you are praying to yourself?

Yes, only not to my lower self, not to my whole self, but to that part of me that is divine, eternal, loving. And it hears me and answers.

I thank Thee and love Thee, O Lord, who dwellest in me. (19 March 1900; PSS 53:15)

Year after year the tragic struggle goes on. Both demands of the public persona, as the prophet of a new religion, and the private yearning to see himself as a loving, self-abnegating human being who will blissfully blend in death with the principle of love that pervades the universe—this need and this hope are continually undercut by assaults from his relentless reasoning intellect.

Always there lurked in the shadows the all-purpose nihilistic weapon he had once aimed at a critical article by Aleksandr Druzhinin: “It never occurs to him to wonder whether it’s all nonsense” (*ne vzdor li eto vse*)²² (7 December 1856; PSS 47:104). If zapped by this fearful weapon, perhaps the whole edifice of Tolstoyan Christianity might also be deemed “all nonsense”—indeed, a shattering thought.

But back in his youth the tragic contradiction was still only latent, the optimism he found in Rousseau was still accessible. Perhaps the most purely Rousseauistic prayer recorded in Tolstoy’s diaries occurs very early, on 12 June 1851, at age 23, in the Caucasus:

Yesterday I almost didn’t sleep all night and after writing my diary began to pray to God. The sweetness of the feeling I experienced in prayer is inexpressible. I recited the prayers I ordinarily say, to the Father, the Mother of God, the Trinity, the Gates of Mercy, to my guardian angel, and then I went on praying. If prayer is defined as begging or gratitude, then I did not pray. I wanted something lofty and good; but what, I cannot express, although I clearly understood what it was. I wanted to merge with an all-embracing Being. I asked It to forgive my transgressions, but no, I did not ask that, for I felt that if It [*Ono*] had given me this blessed moment, It had forgiven me. I asked and at the same time felt that there was nothing for me to

ask for, that I could not and did not know how to ask. I gave thanks, yes, but not in words and not in thoughts. In that one feeling I combined everything, both plea and gratitude [crossed out: and submission to Its will]. Any feeling of fear completely disappeared. . . . No, the feeling I experienced yesterday was love of God, a sublime love, combining in itself everything good and excluding everything bad. . . . I did not feel the flesh, I was all spirit.

To be sure, Tolstoy goes on to admit that the flesh soon reasserted itself. He went to sleep and dreamt about glory and women. But even to that he adds a disclaimer of responsibility: *la ne vinovat, ia ne mog* (I’m not to blame, I couldn’t help it) (PSS 46:61-62).

There is no evidence, alas, that such a sublime moment in Tolstoy’s life was ever repeated. Far more typical, I fear, is the cry “Father, help me!”—the cry of a man who, like Dostoevsky’s Shatov, is desperately trying to defend his belief against the unremitting assaults of his “big intellect.”

Notes

1. An early, abbreviated version of this essay was presented at the AAASS convention in November, 1995, in a symposium organized by my Berkeley colleague Liza Knapp, where excellent papers were presented by Knapp herself and by Donna Orwin as well as an illuminating commentary by Robin Feuer Miller.

2. Tolstoy to Bernard Bouvier, president of the Société Jean-Jacques Rousseau of Geneva, 20 March 1905, in PSS 75:234. Original in French, my translation. The letter was written in reply to an invitation to join the recently formed Rousseau Society. Tolstoy’s favorable response to this invitation is most unusual: in general, he replied to all requests to lend his name to honorary societies, academies, public bodies of any kind with scornful silence.

3. Paul Jean Marie Boyer, *Chez Tolstoy: Entretiens à Iasnaia Poliana*, 40. In his biography of Tolstoy, A.N. Wilson casts doubt on this statement, arguing that neither the locket with Rousseau’s portrait nor anyone else’s memory of it survived to corroborate Tolstoy’s claim. (A. N. Wilson, *Tolstoy*, 36.) Neither of these

considerations seems to me weighty enough to impugn Tolstoy's unequivocal testimony. Moreover, Wilson's reference to *several* conversations, in *one* of which Tolstoy stated only that he "wished he could have worn his [Rousseau's] portrait" seems to have no documentary basis at all.

4. In *What Is Art?* (1898) all of these eminences, along with all the great Greek dramatists, Tasso, Milton, and Michelangelo ("with his absurd *Last Judgment*") are cited as examples of art falsely and harmfully canonized by generations of elitist critics who copy one another's misassessments out of incompetence or cowardice. (*Chto takoe iskusstvo?* in *PSS* 15:80.) Shakespeare, of course, later got a special Tolstoyan roasting in "O Shekspire i o drame" (1906). Beethoven's early work is to some extent spared Tolstoy's blanket censure, but the music of his last period, written when he had become deaf, was especially harmful, and it led directly to that very epitome of everything musically pernicious, Richard Wagner. See the illuminating study by Rischin.

5. Dates following quotations indicate Tolstoy's diary entries.

6. The subject is quite well covered in the thorough, if somewhat dated book by Markovitch. A more literary, less ideological approach to the comparison is taken by Vladimir Zbořflek. I have also learned much from two books, one on each of my two protagonists: Weisbein and Jacquet. On Rousseau, Grimsley is also to be recommended. Especially illuminating on Rousseau's relation to the intellectual history of the eighteenth century and on the later impact of his ideas is a fine essay by Melzer, "The Origin of the Counter-Enlightenment: Rousseau and the New Religion of Sincerity." My thanks to Donna Orwin for recommending this essay to me.

7. In *Lettres écrites de la Montagne* (1763) he accused the Calvinists of having betrayed the chief principle of the Reformation, which he identifies, quite ahistorically, as the right of all Christians to interpret Scripture in the light of their own reason.

8. My summary of Rousseau's religious views is derived primarily from the *Profession du foi* of the Vicaire savoyard from *Émile*, supplemented by other texts collected or extracted in *RW*.

9. Elsewhere I have analyzed in detail Tolstoy's attitude toward Jesus, especially as revealed in his rewrite of the Gospels. See "Tolstoy and Jesus." In general, Tolstoy clung far more tenaciously than Rousseau did to the label "Christian." As Arthur Melzer argues, Rousseau essentially sought to replace institutional Christianity, a source of intolerance, strife, and war, with a "natural" religion based on each individual's "inner sentiment" or "sincerity," on "what, at the bottom of our hearts, we really *do* believe" ("The Origin..." 352). Melzer pursues the question of "sincerity" further in another interesting essay, "Rousseau and the Modern Cult of Sincerity." Tolstoy on the other hand, insisting that his Christianity was the true Christianity of Jesus, wanted to force all ecclesiastical Christians to recognize that their churches had falsified their Founder's central teachings.

10. "Zhelat' pri smerti oderzhat' svoiu lichnost', eto znachit zhelat' lisheniia sebja vozmozhnosti novoi, molodoi zhizni" (To wish to preserve one's personality after death means to wish to deprive oneself of the possibility of a new, young life), Tolstoy wrote in his diary on 20 September 1902 (*PSS* 54:136). It is not clear, however, in what sense the "young life" would be one's own if one had lost all personal identity.

11. "The worship which God requires is that of the heart; and this, when it is sincere, is always the same. One must be vain to the point of madness to imagine that God takes such great interest in the form of the priest's garments, the order of the words he pronounces, the gestures he makes at the altar, and all his genuflections," says the Vicaire savoyard (*RW* 169, my translation).

12. "According to my new principles," says the Vicaire, "I celebrate it [i.e., the mass] with more veneration," to which Voltaire, in his marginal comments, remarked sarcastically, "Ridicule, car tu ne crois pas à ta messe" (Ridiculous, for you don't believe in your mass). "With the thought that I am bringing to Him [God] the vows of the people in a prescribed form, I follow all the rituals with care; I recite scrupulously, I take care never to omit even the least word or the least ceremony," the Vicaire goes on, again provoking an angry comment from Voltaire: "Et pourquoi? misérable!" (And why? Wretched one! [*RW* 191]). Voltaire's comments are cited in the footnotes.

13. It appears that this title was not originally assigned by Tolstoy himself, but the evidence is clear that he later accepted and used it. See Gusev, 157-58.

14. Donna Orwin, in a searching exposition of the impact on Tolstoy of the Savoyard Vicair's *Profession du foi*, convincingly interprets this passage as an expression of doubt on Tolstoy's part in the capacity of human reason to penetrate the ultimate realities (41). Such doubts were intermittent, manifestations of the lifelong warfare within Tolstoy between his "big intellect" and his yearning for faith.

15. Here, for instance, is a characteristic diary entry for 1 January 1900, lumping together the divinity of Jesus and the Trinity as irrational absurdities wrongfully instilled in children: Если ребенку раз внушено, что он должен верить, что Бог—человек, что Б[ог] 1 и 3, одним словом, что $2 \times 2 = 5$, орудие его познания навеки исковеркано: подорвано доверие к разуму.

А это самое дела[ется] над всеми детьми. Ужасно. (If it is once instilled in a child that he must believe that God is a man, that God is one and three, in a word, that $2 \times 2 = 5$, his instrument of cognition is forever spoiled; his confidence in reason is undermined. And this is done to all children. Terrible [*PSS* 54:4]). Similarly: "The person who believes in Christ the God, in the resurrection, the holy mysteries, etc., ceases to believe in reason. It is a direct statement: I don't believe in reason" (Diary entry of 9 November 1895; *PSS* 53:70). Texts like these seem to me to demonstrate that the influence on Tolstoy of Western rationalists like Rousseau was much more powerful than the latent effects on him, acquired simply by living in a Russian Orthodox culture, of "Eastern Christianity." The latter position is ably and exhaustively expounded in Richard F. Gustafson's splendid work, *Leo Tolstoy: Resident and Stranger: A Study in Fiction and Theology*. I argued my objection more fully in my review article, "Tolstoy Made Whole."

16. See Pavel Biriukov. The subject of Tolstoy's connection with the Orient is also surveyed in Shifman, but unfortunately from a stridently "Leninist" point of view.

17. *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* 17. I have made some changes in the translation.

18. Rousseau's most famous confessed sin was the theft of a ribbon in the household where he worked as a lackey. When the theft was discovered, he publicly blamed a young maidservant, who was then dismissed. Rousseau says he was haunted all his life by this "cruel memory" (*Confessions*, Book II). For most readers, however, among them Voltaire, a far worse crime was his abandonment of the five children he had with his mistress Thérèse Levasseur, an act he blandly justifies by the thought that they were better off being brought up by the State to be workers and peasants "instead of adventurers and fortune-hunters." In fact, however, most of the babies left in the home for Enfants-Trouvés died in their first year, a fact Rousseau did not allow himself to face. He also seems to have given little or no consideration to Thérèse's feelings about the matter. The relevant passages are in the *Confessions*, Book 8. Rousseau's fullest effort to justify his act is in his letter to Mme. de Francueil of 20 April 1751, cited in the notes to *Les confessions (Oeuvres complètes, I, 1431)*.

19. From *Émile*, cited from Markovitch 120.

20. Cited from Jacquet 154. "Je m'attendris à ses bienfaits, je le bénis de ses dons."

21. An early prayer composed by Rousseau in the Chambéry period was found among his papers and published (*Oeuvres complètes*, 4:1036-39). After the expected effusion of awe and admiration before God's infinite power and benefactions, Rousseau does confess, in very general terms, to a plethora of sins brought on by his "passions." He promises to amend his life. "In a word, O my sovereign Master, I will dedicate my life to serving Thee, to obeying Thy laws, and to fulfilling my duties." Quoted from *RW* 6.

22. In teaching Tolstoy, I used to advise students to make for themselves and carry a pocket copy of this marvelous weapon, *ne vzdor li eto vse* - very useful when reading newspapers, listening to political speeches, or reading articles by learned professors.

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