
Tolstoy's *Confession*: The Conception of a Worldview

Galina Ia. Galagan

Pushkinskii dom, St. Petersburg

If one were to attempt to enumerate the major features of Tolstoy's *Confession*, one would have to begin with the fact that at its core it constitutes an analysis of the *dynamics* of individual consciousness and the *inertia* of group consciousness.

Tolstoy's *Confession* is not constrained by the framework of an established genre. Nor, by the way, were the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine and Rousseau any less *sui generis* in their time. Tolstoy's text, like theirs, is notable for its brilliant revelation of its author's personality.

Although the *Confession* was originally published in *Russkaia Mysl'*, No. 5 (1882) under the title "Preface to an Unpublished Work," referring to Tolstoy's religious and philosophical tracts of the 1880s, it could just as easily have been called an afterword to his spiritual quest of the preceding decades: almost all the fundamental issues in the *Confession* fully presented themselves in Tolstoy's creative work from the end of the 1840s to the mid-1870s.

A year-and-a-half prior to writing N. N. Strakhov (30 November 1875) with a fragment from the future *Confession*, Tolstoy wrote in his diary for February 1874:

Having lived nearly a half-century, I am convinced that life on earth avails us nothing and that any intelligent person who seriously examines it, its labours, fears, reproaches, who struggles asking for its purpose, will, out of madness, immediately shoot himself. Hartmann and Schopenhauer were right. But Schopenhauer would have us believe that there is something for the sake of which he would not shoot himself. It is that

something that is the object of my book. What do we live by? Religion".*

The title, "What do we live by?," was the first of those which Tolstoy conceived for his *profession de foi* (PSS 62: 220). That is precisely what he called his future composition in the letter to Strakhov. Subsequently, other tentative titles followed—"Why do I write?" (PSS 62: 226), and "What am I?" (PSS 23: 526)—questions to which Tolstoy did not get answers either from the lives of people in his circle or from the experimental sciences and abstract thought.

Each of these questions gave rise to a spiritual anxiety that demolished his trust in the dogmas he had unconsciously imbibed in childhood. And each of them Tolstoy had asked himself in his diary and in incomplete philosophical jottings long before he became famous as the author of the *Confession*. Here are some examples:

In 1847: "Is it necessary. . . to know that I exist?" (PSS 1:231; "On the goals of philosophy").

In 1851: "For what reason do people write?" (PSS 1:246. This question initiates an unfinished meditation on the mixed motives for embracing a literary vocation.)

In 1857: "Yesterday evening I was tormented by a sudden onslaught of doubt about *everything* [. . .] What's it all for? And what am I?" (PSS 47: 118; Diary.)

Also in 1857: "why do we live? – we ourselves don't know" (PSS 47: 160; Diary).

And in 1865: "What am I? Why am I alive? What will happen after death?" (PSS 7:125; "On religion").

One additional question required an answer just as insistently. It was called forth by a general awareness of the contradiction between Christ's teachings, professed by all Christians, and their ethical practice. A premonition of this question could already be felt in the story, "The Raid" (1852), in which received notions about justice and courage were subjected to doubt. The narrator, having accompanied his troops to the battlefield,

*PSS 48: 347. All references to *Confession* are to the standard Russian (Jubilee) edition, and are cited in the text by volume and page number.

the scene of actual combat, confesses: "I will not speak of the thoughts which preoccupied me" (*PSS* 3: 27).

The implication of this admission became clear two-and-a-half years later, in the epilogue to the second *Sebastopol Sketch*: "Now I have said what I wanted to say; but I am beset by a heavy after-thought. Perhaps I ought not to have said it. Perhaps what I said belongs to the category of those harmful truths which we each carry hidden unconsciously in our souls and which ought not to be spoken aloud . . ." (*PSS* 4: 59).

This confession follows directly after the passage depicting the truce with its maimed corpses in blue and grey uniforms, stench of dead bodies, carts laden with the slain, and crowds of people from Sebastopol and the French camp pouring out to look upon what they had wrought:

And these Christians, all subscribing to the one great law of love and self-sacrifice, looking at what they had done, shall they not fall on their knees in repentance before Him Who, when He gave them life, implanted in each of their souls . . . love for the good, . . . shall they not embrace one another like brothers with tears of joy and happiness? Not at all! The scraps of white cloth will be put away and once again the engines of death and suffering will whistle overhead, and once again the blood of the innocent will flow and wailing and cursing will be heard. (*PSS* 4: 59)

In *War and Peace* this problem becomes paramount. In it, we can detect the fundamental thrust of the Tolstoyan analysis of group consciousness. "By what means," Tolstoy asks (this is what becomes of cardinal importance to him now—by what means) "have Christian folk who profess the law of love [. . .], fallen away from what they themselves recognize as the professed essential qualities of human nature?" (*PSS* 15: 264-65 [emphasis added]). In *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy seeks the answer to that question in the context of everyday worldly life.

In his *Confession*, Tolstoy named the discrepancy between the practical ethics of Christians and the ideal of Christian morality as the reason for the collapse of confidence in the teachings he had

unconsciously accepted in childhood. "My lapse of faith," wrote Tolstoy,

occurred in the same way that it occurred and still occurs in people of our level of education. It seems to me that in most cases it happens thus: people live like people everywhere live and everyone lives on the basis of principles . . . that have nothing in common with religious teachings . . . ; doctrine . . . is professed at a remove from life and independently of it . . . Judging by a person's life and conduct . . . there is no way of determining whether that person is a believer or not. (*PSS* 23:2)

The prevailing worldview, which held the narrator of the *Confession* in submission and drove him to thoughts of suicide, was later labelled, in *The Kingdom of God is Within Us*, a societal phenomenon. Firmly established in pre-Christian times, it had come to replace individual values: the meaning of life, understood as the desire for good exclusively for oneself, had been transferred to the collective life of aggregates of individuals (families, tribes, kinfolk, states). This voluntary merging of private and group interests, it would appear, could preserve and protect public tranquillity only for a short while. The refusal to sacrifice private good for the public welfare constantly arose and it led to the use of force against the dissenters. Discord, civil unrest, and war came to be accepted as the norm in both individual and collective consciousness.

The Christian era had demonstrated that the prevailing societal worldview was a powerful and seductive opponent in its self-defence. Pretending to indisputable authority in defining evil and relying on a centuries-old tradition that justified the use of violence, it successfully exploited the psychological law of inertia and kept generation after generation from freeing itself from bondage to temptation.

In Tolstoy's *Confession*, the exposure of conventional thinking is linked to the Biblical theme of temptation. A symbol for the life of people in Tolstoy's circle by birth or education is found in the rhetorical figure of tempting "sweets," as will be familiar to readers of *Anna Karenina*'s soliloquy just before her death: "We all want what is sweet and tasty. If not candy, then dirty ice cream" (*PSS*

19: 340). This symbol derives from the well-known parable about the traveler who attempts to save himself from a wild beast by taking refuge in a dry well and discovers a dragon there. The traveler clings to the branch of a shrub growing in a crevice in the wall on which a white and black mouse are gnawing. The hands of the traveler weaken. He knows that his fate is sealed, but *while he hangs suspended, he sees a drop of honey* on the leaves and he licks them.

Tolstoy wrote about five types of temptation in "The Christian Teaching" (1894-96). But he had already discussed each of them in his *Confession*. The first four—the temptations of study, family, work, and fellowship—remove individual responsibility for lapses from the demands of conscience. They permit feelings of covetousness, vanity, envy, pride, etc. not to seem sinful. Among these temptations one walks as in a swamp, falling into them, sinking, pulling oneself up, and then getting mired in them again. In his self-critical verdict on his own lapses from ideal virtue, Tolstoy dwells upon each one of them.

The fifth temptation is directly related to group consciousness. It permits justifications for collective lapses from the light of Gospel truth. In Tolstoy's *Confession*, support for the prevailing worldview's reliance on "rationality" (PSS 23: 8), intellect (PSS 23: 29), and "the welfare of mankind" (PSS 23: 7) as the aim of existence is a direct consequence of this temptation. It dilutes and practically eliminates the problem of the contradiction between the Gospel teachings professed by Christians and their ethical practice. This is the problem that is named in the rough drafts of the epilogue to *War and Peace* as the "sole" and "eternal" problem posed by history.

Long before the *Confession* was written, Tolstoy was well aware of all the props supporting the prevailing worldview. The first doubts about intellection relate to the mid 1850s. In March 1856, Tolstoy writes in his diary: "My chief mistake in life consists in the fact that I have allowed intellect to replace feeling and allowed my supple mind to transform what my conscience considered bad into what it called good" (PSS 47: 68). At the beginning of the 1860s, he mentions the inevitability of the

intellect's encounter with the "incomprehensible," the "inscrutable," and "boundless" (PSS 7: 120; "On the character of thought in youth and old age"). In the mid-1860s, we read in Tolstoy's diary the following notation: "The intellect fabricates imaginary reasons for each action, which for a single person is called a 'conviction' . . . and for the behaviour of whole peoples in history is named an *idea*. The chess game of the intellect operates independently of life, and life from it. . . Our mind has the ability to deviate from instinct and to rationalize these deviations" (PSS 48: 52-53, 59-60). Both in *War and Peace* (Bezukhov and Bolkonsky) and *Anna Karenina* (Levin), the bankruptcy of intellect in pursuit of what is morally imperative is given aesthetic embodiment. This motif also lends internal structure to a whole series of philosophical sketches Tolstoy composed in the mid-1870s: "Of future life beyond time and space" (1875); "Of the soul and its life" (1875); "On the meaning of the Christian religion" (1875-76); "Faith as the definition of religion" (1875-76); "The Christian catechism" (1877).

Throughout the following decades Tolstoy never relented in his discrediting of intellect. In the *Confession* it is defined as "the temptation of idle cogitation" (PSS 23:43). In the 1880s and 1890s, intellectual aptitudes are opposed to the capabilities of pure Reason and rational consciousness.

Let us turn, however, to the concept of the "welfare of mankind" as the anchor of the prevailing worldview. As early as the mid-1860s, Tolstoy had labeled the idea of basing philosophical speculation on the concept of "mankind" a "foggy mental game" (PSS 7: 126). Here is how he defended his judgment:

Mankind is one of those concepts which we can only imagine, but which we cannot master; mankind is not an entity because, as soon as we introduce the concept of mankind into our mental categories we . . . arrive at arbitrary and false deductions. Mankind does not pose itself any tasks and does not attempt to solve any problems. (PSS 7: 126)

In the *Confession*, Tolstoy adds "enigmatic" to this characterization of the concept. Tolstoy's irony announces itself even more sharply a bit later in

The Kingdom of God is Within Us: "Mankind—as an actual concept," he writes,

does not and cannot exist . . . Where is the limit to mankind? Where does it begin and end? Does mankind reach its outer limit with savages, idiots, alcoholics, and the insane? . . . Love for mankind, logically derived from love for the individual, makes no sense because mankind is a fiction. (*PSS* 28: 83, 296)

In rationalizing lapses from what is morally imperative, the prevailing worldview sometimes speaks of the good of mankind and sometimes speaks of the common good. The temptation to rely on these concepts has its root in the era when human societies were in formation. These concepts lost their initial justification from the moment that there were violent incursions on human communities. But they did not remain forgotten. On the contrary, from generation to generation, from century to century, they took on the status of conventional wisdom, dooming life to a well-worn track. "It was that temptation," Tolstoy explained, "which Caiaphus expressed when he demanded the murder of Christ in the name of the greater good" (*PSS* 39: 145). Concerning that same temptation, here is what Tolstoy had already written in *War and Peace*: "From the time the world came into existence and people killed one another, never has a single person committed a crime against his fellow being without consoling himself with one thought. That thought is *le bien publique*, purporting to be the greater good of other people" (*PSS* 11: 348).

This very problem was the source of Tolstoy's profound meditations on the course of the French Revolution while he was writing *War and Peace*. To be sure, his polemic with a range of historians of the revolution was multilayered. But the well-spring of this polemic, concisely put, was Tolstoy's constant attentiveness to the disparity between the Revolution's grand ideals (Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity) and the ethical practice (tribunals, guillotines) of the faithful pupils of Rousseau, who had submitted to that worldview whose inevitable ally was the law of force.

Love for mankind and devotion to its welfare—this worldview replaced love of God and service

to Him. It is this substitution and the way of life it mandates that Tolstoy writes about in his *Confession*. In his understanding, ignorance and epicureanism are paths taken in order to deny and escape the evils of existence; they lead to a state of spiritual inertia. On the other hand, energetic rejection of life or mere compliance with life's absurdity are paths that lead to a condition of spiritual dynamism. This concept of spiritual dynamism becomes seminal in Tolstoy's works beginning in the 1850s. In the period of writing *War and Peace*, he frequently addressed its logical basis. And his readers encounter the esthetic realization of this idea both in *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*.

Liberation from the bonds of conventional wisdom and the discovery of life's meaning, without abolishing the inevitability of death, is demonstrated in the *Confession* in a series of mutually alternating "revivals" and "relapses" (*PSS* 23: 45). This spiritual dynamic begins with a perturbation not of the mind, but of the heart (*PSS* 23:8), a sensation of spiritual discomfort, a sharp decrease in the allure of temptation, and the birth of inner contradictions and dualities. Then follow "pauses" in living accompanied by constant questioning: "What's it all for? And then? What kind of creature am I? Why do I live?" (*PSS* 23: 10, 11, 18-20). This crisis of the "pause" is linked to a renunciation of life itself. It is motivated in the *Confession* by a personal assertion of the vanity of all temptation and the irrationality of all that exists.

The path to a new worldview is inescapably accompanied by an experience of renunciation that leads at times to a tragic outcome. To overcome this experience is to arrive at enlightenment.

Apart from Tolstoy's revelation that the life of the people was concordant with the knowledge that brings faith, he was saved by a never absent tormenting "feeling . . . of orphanhood, of solitude amidst everything and everyone, and of hope for someone's assistance" (*PSS* 23: 43-44). This sensation he could not name otherwise than the search for God (*PSS* 23: 45, 46). "I would long ago have killed myself," he tells the reader, "if I had not had the dim hope of finding Him" (*PSS* 23: 45). And he continues: "I came . . . to faith because, lacking faith I found . . . nothing but ruination" (*PSS* 23: 52).

But this acknowledged return to faith kept at bay the agitation in his soul only for a short while.

In time, Tolstoy considered holy the worldview on which was based the teaching that had given all people "the image of inner perfection, truth and love in the person of Christ" (PSS 28: 41). And he called the Sermon on the Mount the main precept of Christ, the testament that revealed the path to "the unification of those who had been cast apart" (PSS 45: 87; 43, 127).

The problem of the unification of all people announced itself at the very beginning of Tolstoy's creative career. Its ultimate resolution depended upon Tolstoy's opposition to church and state. The main channel for that opposition was charted in the *Confession*.

The Church, as a communion of believers united in love and possessed of true knowledge, became initially the foundation of the Tolstoyan faith as well as the basis for his conscious return to it.

In answer to questions put to him regarding the liturgical aspect of faith, Tolstoy wrote:

I told myself that God's truth could not be accessible to a separate individual, that it revealed itself only to a whole assembly of people united in love. In order to attain that truth, it was necessary not to separate oneself, and in order not to separate oneself, it was necessary to love and be reconciled with all those with whom one was not in agreement. (PSS 23: 49)

Certain questions raised by life itself initiated the crisis with regard to the relations of the writer of the *Confession* to the Church. They are well known.

First, there was the mutual enmity of the various sects, each of which was convinced of the indubitable verity of its understanding of the truth. Second, there was the position of the Church toward war and capital punishment. These vital issues allowed Tolstoy to speak of distinctions in religious instruction about the origin of divisiveness among people. "To me," he wrote, "having believed in the truth of the unity of all people, it came as a rude awakening that religious dogma was destroying precisely what it should be creating" (PSS 23: 54).

This admission by Tolstoy tells us that, as the moment of the composition of the *Confession* approached, he had already conceived his worldview: on the path toward a Christian understanding of life an individual's consciousness had to overcome the temptation to attempt any justification of enmity and violence. The aim of existence according to that understanding of the world was love for and service to God alone. The achievement of that aim could only occur through unceasing effort, both conscious and unconscious, toward that ideal indicated by the Sermon on the Mount. "Christ issued his teaching," Tolstoy wrote, "keeping in mind that total perfection would never be achieved, but that constant striving . . . toward that endless goal would increase human welfare . . . The fulfillment of the teaching occurs in the movement away from the self and toward God" (PSS 28: 77, 79).

As Tolstoy understood it, liberation from the shackles of conventional thought required internal discipline. Each person in relation to the quest for truth was like a traveler walking in the darkness toward the light of a lantern moving in the distance. The traveler could not see what he had already traversed since it was covered in darkness, nor what had not yet been illuminated by the lantern. However, wherever the traveler found himself on the road he could always see what had been lit by the lantern and thus he was competent to choose one or another bend in the road. Whatever the traveler chose to do, motivated by his own reasons, the choice was his to make freely. A refusal to follow the conventional path which divided people from one another was the result of personal effort, the type of effort by which one may "seize" the Kingdom of God.

The autonomy of this movement "from the self toward God" is an idea which provides a hidden theme within all Tolstoy's public statements from the 1880s to the 1900s. It is precisely this process which, by itself alone, in Tolstoy's thinking, provides the binding principle and the future promise of the unification of all people.

Tolstoy's path toward the issues raised in the *Confession* and subsequent religious-philosophical works does not permit us to speak of the conception of his worldview as a conscious, rationalistic

experiment. The process of conception was laborious and painful for Tolstoy. He underwent much suffering in his quest for an answer to the meaning of life that was not mocked by the inevitability of death. This answer finally came to him in the pro-

cess of writing the *Confession* and it dispelled the inertia of group consciousness. The law of love, as opposed to the rule of force, opened the prospect for the restoration of a moral aspect to the world.

Translated by Dale E. Peterson