



On the Resurrection of Christ: Vladimir Solovyov's Letter to Leo Tolstoy

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. Vladimir Solovyov and Leo Tolstoy

Few Americans have ever heard the name of Vladimir Sergeevich Solovyov, and because of Soviet censorship, perhaps even fewer Soviet citizens know of him. Yet, during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, practically alone, he attempted to revive Christian thought in philosophy and ethics in Russian society. As the foremost Russian philosopher of the nineteenth century and one of its outstanding poets, Solovyov founded twentieth-century Russian religious philosophy and was teacher to such outstanding thinkers as Sergei Bulgakov and Nicholas Berdyaev.

Born in 1853, the son of the famous historian Sergei Mikhailovich Solovyov, a professor at Moscow University, at the age of fourteen under the influence of nihilism Vladimir abandoned Christianity to devote himself to science. But before he had turned twenty, he had returned to the Orthodox Church and to the study of history, philology, and philosophy at Moscow University. He defended his master's thesis, "The Crisis of Western Philosophy: Against the Positivists," in 1874, and in early 1878 delivered a series of lectures on the philosophy of religion, later published under the title of "Readings of God-Manhood." Among his audience for these lectures were Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy. Solovyov and Dostoevsky became close friends, but his relations with Tolstoy were always cool. During the last decade of his life, the philosopher wrote some of his best poetry and most original philosophical works, such as, "The Meaning of Love," "Three Conversations," and his main work, "The Justification of Good." He died in 1900.

As early as March, 1855, Leo Tolstoy wrote in his diary:

Yesterday a conversation about Divinity and Faith suggested to me a great, stupendous idea to the realization of which I feel capable of devoting my life.

page 10

That idea is the founding of a new religion corresponding to the present development of mankind; the religion of Christ but purged of dogmas and mysticism—a practical religion, not promising future bliss but giving bliss on earth.¹

And before completing his great novel *Anna Karenina* in 1877, at nearly fifty years of age, Tolstoy began to experience a personal crisis that would eventually cause him to renounce

his former life and works and attempt to solve for himself the mystery of life and death. During the course of his search he examined philosophies of both the East and the West, finally returning to what he described as the “solid ground”² of the gospels. As with everything else, however, Tolstoy did not accept uncritically the interpretations of the gospels given by others, nor was he willing to profess his opinions only to his friends in letters. Tolstoy undertook to write a series of books in which he explained both the nature of his torment and the conclusions to which he had come, reinterpreting every passage in the gospels dealing with Christ’s divinity from his virgin birth to his resurrection: “Confession” (begun in 1879); “Criticism of Dogmatic Theology” (1880); “Harmonization and Translation of the Four Gospels” (1882); and, finally, “What I Believe” (1883).

In “Harmonization and Translation of the Four Gospels,” Tolstoy professed to find hope and reason for living in Christ and his teachings, but in his interpretation of the gospels and Christ’s words, consciously rejected the “spirit world” of traditional Christian metaphysics. Deeply influenced by the philosophy of Rousseau, he sought solutions to human moral and religious problems in this world and in people rather than the world of mystical belief.

In a letter to a friend dated February 2, 1880, Tolstoy wrote:

I and all the rest of us live like animals, and will die the same way. To escape from this excruciating situation, Christ offered us salvation. Who is Christ: A God or a man? He is what he says he is. He says he is the Son of God, he says he is the Son of Man, he says, “I am what I tell you I am. I am the truth and the life...” And from that moment they began to mix it all up together and say he was God and the second person of the Trinity, the result was sacrilege, falsehood and nonsense. If he were that, he would have been capable of saying so. He offered us salvation. How? By teaching us to give a meaning to our lives that is not destroyed by death... For me, the foundation of his teaching is that to achieve salvation it is necessary, every day and every hour of every day, to think of God, of one’s soul, and therefore to set the love of one’s neighbor above mere bestial existence.³

2. Solovyov, Tolstoy, and the Church

Solovyov had always been critical of Tolstoy’s teachings, but evidently Tolstoy’s ideas on Christ’s resurrection particularly disturbed him. He felt it important to convince the great novelist of the error of his thought. Solovyov’s letter did not accomplish its goal, it seems, because in 1901 the Church of Russia excommunicated Leo Tolstoy. Among the reasons given for the excommunication was Tolstoy’s blasphemy about the divinity of Jesus Christ:

In his words and letters, circulated in great numbers throughout the world by himself and his disciples, and especially within the frontiers of our beloved fatherland, he preaches the abolition of all the dogma of the Orthodox Church

¹E. B. Greenwood, “Tolstoy and Religion,” in *New Essays on Tolstoy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1978) 155.

²Henri Troyat, *Tolstoy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967) 395.

³Troyat, *Tolstoy*, 395.

and of the essence of the Christian faith with fanatical frenzy; he denies the living and personal God glorified in the Holy Trinity, Creator and Providence of the universe; he refutes Our Lord Jesus Christ, God made Man, Redeemer and Saviour of the world, who suffered for us and our salvation, and who has been raised from the dead.⁴

II. ON THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST: SOLOVYOV'S LETTER TO TOLSTOY*

July 28-August 2, 1894

Since my last letter, which I sent you by Mr. Krauskopf, I was seriously ill twice, and I do not want to put off any longer the important conversation which I owe you. Our whole dispute centers around one concrete point, the resurrection of Christ. I think that there is nothing in your own personal *Weltanschauung* (if I understand your last works correctly) that would prevent you from accepting the truth of the resurrection. On the contrary, there are even some things that would cause you to accept it. First I will speak about resurrection in general and then about the resurrection of Christ.

1) You concede that our world is progressively changing from the lower forms and levels of being to the higher or more perfect; 2) you accept the interaction between the internal spiritual and this higher physical life; and 3) based on this interaction, you accept that the perfection of the spiritual being is expressed in the fact that this personal spiritual life subordinates and controls the physical life.

On the basis of these three points, one must, I think, arrive at the truth of resurrection. The fact of the matter is that spiritual power relative to material existence is not a constant, but something that is ever increasing. In the animal world it is generally found only in a latent, potential state. In humans it is freed and becomes manifest. But this liberation occurs at first only ideally in the form of cognitive recognition: I distinguish myself from my animal nature and recognize my inner independence from it and superiority to it. Can this *recognition*, however, become transformed into *action*? It not only can, but in part, it does. As in the animal world we find some rudiments or signs of a rational life, so in human life there undoubtedly exist rudiments of that high perfect state in which the spirit actually controls material life. It struggles with the dark aspirations of material nature and subjects them to itself (not only distinguishing itself from them). A greater or lesser victory depends on the degree of inner spiritual perfection. The extreme triumph of the hostile material base is death, that is, the liberation of the chaotic life of the material parts upon the destruction of their rational, expedient connection.

Death is the clear victory of meaninglessness over sense, chaos over the cosmos. This is especially clear in respect to higher forms of life. The death of a person is the destruction of the perfect organism, that is, of the expedient form and instrument of the higher rational life. Such a victory of the lower over the higher, such a disarming of the spiritual principle shows, evidently, the inadequacy of its power. But this power is *increasing*. Immortality is for humans the same as reason for animals. The meaning of the animal kingdom is the reasoning animal, that is, humanity. The meaning of humanity is the immortal one, that is, Christ. As the animal world is drawn toward reason, humanity is drawn toward immortality. If

⁴Ibid., 560-561.

*Translated by James G. Walker.

the struggle with chaos and death is the essence of world development, even though the bright, spiritual side makes slow, gradual progress, resurrection, that is, the true final victory of a living being over death, is the necessary conclusion of this process. In principle, the process also ends with this. All further progress, strictly speaking, is only an extension of this and comprises a universal assimilation of this individual victory or an extension of its consequences to all humanity and all the world.

If by the term miracle we mean a fact which contradicts the general course of things and is therefore impossible, then resurrection is the exact opposite of miracle, for it is a fact which is absolutely necessary in the general course of things. If by miracle we understand an unprecedented event, which has occurred for the first time, then the resurrection of “the first of the dead to come from the grave” is, of course, a miracle, just as was the appearance of the first organic cell amidst inorganic matter, an animal amidst primeval plant life, or the first human amidst orangutans. Natural history does not question these miracles. Correspondingly, the miracle of resurrection is unquestionable for the history of humanity.

Naturally, from the point of view of mechanical materialism all of this is null and void. But I would be very surprised to hear any fundamental objection from you based on your point of view. I am sure that the idea of resurrection and “the first to rise from the grave” is just as natural for you as it is for me. Yet one might still ask whether it occurred to the historical figure whose resurrection is spoken about in the New Testament. Here are my reasons for believing in the actual resurrection of Jesus Christ, the first to rise from the grave.

I. Victory over death is a necessary natural result of internal spiritual perfection. That person in whom the spiritual source has achieved power decisively and conclusively over everything lower cannot be subjugated by death. Spiritual power, having achieved total perfection, inevitably overflows, so to speak, the bounds of the subjective psychic life and takes over bodily life, transforming it, spiritualizing it, and immutably linking it to itself. And it is specifically the image of complete spiritual perfection that I find in the Christ of the gospels. This image I cannot consider contrived for a number of reasons, none of which I need cite here, because you do not consider the Christ of the gospels to be a myth. If then this spiritually perfect man actually existed, he was in fact that first man to arise from the dead, and it would be fruitless to await another.

II. Permit me to explain the second reason for my faith with an analogy from another field. When the astronomer Luvère became convinced by means of certain calculations that another planet should be located out beyond the orbit of Uranus, and then saw it in a telescope just as it should be according to his calculations, he hardly had any logical reason to believe that the planet he was observing was not the one he had calculated, not the real one, and that the real one would perhaps be discovered later on. Similarly, based on the general concept of world and historical development and on the sequence of its stages, we find that after the appearance of the spiritual source in an ideological form in the philosophy and art of the ancient Greeks and in the ethical and religious ideals of the Hebrew prophets (the concept of the Kingdom of God), the ultimate and highest moment of this revelation must have been the personal and real manifestation of that very spiritual source. It was the embodiment in a living person, who not only in ideas and artistic examples but in deed demonstrated the power and victory of the spirit over the hostile, evil source

whose ultimate expression is death. In this the material body is actually resurrected into a spiritual one. Thus we find the description of just such a man who personally and actually embodies such a spiritual source. He was described by illiterate Jews who had no idea of the various stages of world development, yet they related with amazement that this man had arisen (that is, offered purely empirically a sequence of facts that has for us an internally logical connection) as if they were describing something unexpected and improbable for them. Seeing such a connection, we have absolutely no right to accuse these witnesses of contriving the facts, the significance of which for them was unclear. It would be almost the same as our supposing that the workers who built the telescope of the Paris Observatory, though knowing nothing about Luvere's calculations, nevertheless purposely set it up so that Luvere saw in this telescope the ghost of a non-existent Neptune.

III. About the third reason for my belief in the resurrection of Christ I will speak only briefly, since it is so well known. This fact does not, however, diminish its strength. Without the resurrection of Christ, the exceptional enthusiasm of the apostolic community would not have had a sufficient basis to have continued, and, in general, all of the early history of Christianity would have been a series of impossibilities. Unless, of course, one were to admit (as some have done) that there was in fact no first century in Christian history, but that it began with the second or even the third century.

Since I recognize that the history of the world and of humankind makes sense, I personally do not have the slightest doubt in the resurrection of Christ, and all objections to this truth only support my faith by their weakness. The only original and serious objection that I know of is yours. In a recent conversation with me, you said that if one recognized the resurrection and, consequently, the special supernatural significance of Christ, then it would force Christians to rely more for their salvation on the mystical power of this supernatural being than on their own moral works. But such a misuse of the truth only exposes, in the final analysis, those who misuse it. Since in fact Christ, though he rose from the dead, cannot do anything ultimately for us without our personal participation, there can be no danger of quietism for sincere and honest Christians. There might have been a danger for Christians if the risen Christ still had a visible reality; but, under present conditions, when our real personal connections with him can be only spiritual, a connection predicated on the individual works of every believer, only hypocrites and scoundrels could refer to grace to the detriment of moral obligations. Moreover, God-man is not the all-inclusive absolute of the Eastern mystics, and the union with him cannot be one-sidedly passive. He is "the first to rise from the dead," the indicator of the way, the leader and the banner for an active life, struggle, and the process of self-perfection, and not an immersion into Nirvana.

In any case, no matter what the practical results of Christ's resurrection might be, the question about its truth is not determined by them.

I would be most interested to know what you have to say about this. If you do not have the time to write, I await a meeting with you. I wish you health and send my respects to all of yours.

Your sincerely devoted,
Vladimir Solovyov