

The Belief of Leo Tolstoy in the Gospels as Garnered from his Story where Love is there God is Also

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Abstract

This study has at its focal point the fact that Tolstoy firmly believed in the gospel and he did not rest till he read the gospel and put it into practice. For Tolstoy real spirituality lies in the fact that the words of Jesus the Lord should be put into practice in actual life rather than being talked about and discoursed about. The story *Where Love is God is also* brought into focus to illustrate that God comes to us in different forms and particularly in the form of poor and hungry people.

Keywords: Tolstoy, God, Love, Gospel, Jesus, Christ, Martin, Church.

Leo Tolstoy, the great Russian novelist, known for his magnum opus *War and Peace* (1869); was a man of great genius. In the latter part of his life, he was intensely involved in spiritual pursuits and he read various books on theology and Christ and it appears he was particularly devoted to reading the gospels. This is evident from many of the short stories that he has written. In this study the author shall concentrate on three short stories by Tolstoy and essay to discover how closely Tolstoy studied the gospels and practiced what is taught in them. Tolstoy knew that absolute truth had no anchorings in time and space and therefore he felt it futile to study the times of great spiritual men in order to understand the great truths they propounded.

“Tolstoy considered that in the Gospels we can find absolute truth; and that to understand them it is not necessary to undertake any minute study of the conditions of time and place in which Jesus lived.” (Maud 4)

Tolstoy believed that all Christians should go to the gospels, read them with complete faith and surrender ; assimilate them and finally put them into practice without asking any questions. Such an act , believes Tolstoy , would result in joy limitless ; and a great understanding of what Christ expected us to do as believers in him. That Tolstoy wanted all believers in Jesus to practice the teachings of Christ is evident in what Arthur Turberville says in his biography of Leo Tolstoy, “Go, that is, to the Gospels and begin by accepting and acting up to that which Christ made so plain that no honest inquirer can mistake His meaning.”(Turberville 7)

Then again, Tolstoy’s complete faith in the gospels to the exclusion of the display of all outer paraphernalia of Christianity led him into controversy since the beginning of the 1880s. Despite such

opposition and criticism from several quarters, Tolstoy refrained from changing his belief system till his death. "Tolstoy's belief in a true christianity shorn of politics and vulgar ceremony put him in bitter conflict with both the church and the Tsar from the early 1800s up to his death." (Jones 24) An instance of Tolstoy's opposition to the rule made by christian teachers is that of taking an oath on the gospel. Tolstoy is of the opinion that when the Holy Bible itself forbids man from swearing or taking an oath how is it that man has taken the liberty to formulate rules condemned in the Bible. "The chief obstacle to our understanding that the Gospel wholly forbids our taking an oath is that the so-called Christian teachers boldly insist upon men's taking oaths Von the Gospel and in this acting con-trary to the Gospel." (Tolstoy, *What I believe* 89)

Beyond any doubt, Tolstoy directly believed in the teachings of Jesus Christ and not in the doctrines of the church. For him the practice of spirituality in day to day existence mattered more than the display of ecclesiastical knowledge of any kind. "*What is Believe* is an assertion of Tolstoy's belief in the teachings of Jesus, but not in the doctrines of the church." (Tolstoy, *The Lion and the Honeycomb* 33)

Tolstoy, in his short story *Where Love is there God is also*, recounts the story of a shoemaker named Martin Avdyeitch who is honest and hardworking. As fate would have it, his wife dies early. Gradually he loses his children who die one by one. Now Martin is left with only one son who is called Kapitoshka whom he starts to consider his only support in life. Soon this son who had been growing up to help his father and be the prop of his old age also develops fever and dies. Martin is thus left all by himself in the vast world and he starts to complain to God of the injustice meted out to him. Martin is inconsolable in his grief and he even groans in the night calling out the name of his son. Very soon, an old traveller, who happens to be Martin's old acquaintance comes to see Martin after having paid a visit to the Troitsa monastery far away. Martin shares with him his personal loss and expresses his desire to die because he feels God has been unjust to him. The old traveller tells him that it is not wise to blame God because what God does is always just and the world moves according to God's will. The old man further told him that he was unhappy because he was living for his own happiness. Martin is puzzled since it is generally accepted that all live for their own personal happiness and satisfaction. He therefore asks the old man, "But what shall one live for? And the little old man said," "We must live for God, Martin. He gives you life, and for his sake you must live." (Tolstoy, *Where Love is there God is also*, 12) The old man further advised him that if he began living for God he would not grieve and everything would be fine. The old traveller told Martin to begin reading the Gospel because it is in the New Testament Christ has taught us how to live for God. A fire of inspiration was kindled in the heart of Martin and the same day he went and bought the New Testament in large print and began reading it. Initially he read the gospel only on holidays. As reading cheered him, he gradually began to read every evening and the more he read the clearer was the meaning of what Christ wanted of him. He gradually began to understand how to live for God. Earlier, when he fell asleep he used to groan out the name of Kapitoshka but now when he was tired and went to bed he started to glorify the name of the Lord. Before, he used to go and get drunk; but now he worked in the day and in the evenings read the gospel and went to bed a peaceful and happy man.

It is noteworthy that Martin read the gospel according to St. Luke and this tempts us to also believe that Tolstoy too might have preferred Luke's version of the gospel to the others. Whatever it may but what is to be understood and appreciated is that Tolstoy was in love with the gospel. Tolstoy in this story quotes

several verses from the Gospel of St. Luke; and these passages from the gospel affirm the firm belief of Tolstoy not only in what St. Luke proclaims about Christ because also that man should actually live the teachings of Jesus as found in the gospel. Tolstoy, therefore, stresses the need for a practical approach to spirituality. He is not happy just with preaching of the gospel in churches; but the greatest satisfaction comes to him when he himself follows what Christ has directed humanity to practice. He wishes humans to cultivate the habit of putting into practice the pristine words of Jesus found in the gospel.

It is late one night and Martin is absorbed reading the lines from the gospel of St. Luke and he reads the following passages: "And unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek offer also the other ; and him that taketh away thy cloak forbid not to take thy coat also. Give to every man that asketh of thee ; and of him that taketh away thy goods ask them not again. And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise." He read further also those verses, where God speaks " And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say? Whosoever cometh to me, and heareth my sayings, and doeth them, I will skew you to whom he is like : he is like a man which built an house, and digged deep, and laid the foundation on a rock : and when the flood arose, the stream beat vehemently upon that house, and could not shake it : for it was founded upon a rock. But he that heareth, and doeth not, is like a man that without a foundation built an house upon the earth ; against which the stream did beat vehemently, and immediately it fell ; and the ruin of that house was great." (Tolstoy, *Where Love is there God is also*, 14)

Martin suddenly fell asleep while he was reading the gospel and he thought he heard someone say - Look for me tomorrow on the street ! I am coming ! Next morning when Martin woke up he rejoiced at the thought of the promise the Lord had made that he would come to his house. In the morning the sweeper Stephanitch came to shovel away the snow that had gathered around the house. Stephanitch was a weak old man and the weather was extremely cold on account of the snow fall. Martin thought he was getting crazy; Stephanitch had come and he was imagining that Christ had come. Observing Stephanitch taking rest for a while Martin felt pity for the weak old man and decided to give him tea. He called Stephanitch in, bade him sit down and served him tea till the old man was satisfied and thanked him for the refreshment.

Stephanitch went away and later in the day a woman with her child was observed to be helplessly waiting in the snow; lacking even a shawl as protection from the cold weather. Martin took pity on them and summoned them to his home and fed them. After the woman had left with her child nourished with warm food and comforted with Martin's shawl wrapped around it; a tired old woman was observed taking rest after she had put down her apples and the bag of shavings. A small little boy ran in and stole an apple from her. The woman observed this and created a ruckus threatening to beat the boy and take him to the police. Martin begged her to forgive the boy just as God forgives our shortcomings. In the night Martin had a dream vision in which he saw the three guests smiling at him and parading away in succession. After that

Martin's soul rejoiced ; "he crossed himself, put on his eye-glasses, and began to read the Evangelists where it happened to open. On the upper part of the page he read, —" For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat : I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink I was a stranger, and ye took me in." . . . And on the lower part of the page he read this : —" Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me " (St. Matthew, chap. xxv.)." (Tolstoy, *Where Love is there God is also*, 26)

At this juncture it is made clear that Tolstoy considered that serving fellow men is equivalent to serving God. Martin had served all the three poor people who had come to his doorstep and the message he got from the Gospel was that having fed the three hungry people he had actually fed God who was the indweller of all beings. Tolstoy is worthy of great appreciation and admiration since he was an individual who never rested content till he put into practice all that was spoken in the Gospel ;and the practice of the teachings of Christ offered him incomparable joy and contentment. Finally Tolstoy believed that , “It is not only grasping truth , understanding things correctly that matters;it is more important to be able to act in harmony with truth , that is, to live up to one’s ideals.” (Philipson 24)

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