APOSTASY AND ECSTASY

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At the peak of Leo Tolstoy's literary power near the turn of the 20th century, the great writer and philosopher was simultaneously admired by the Russian people for his major works which incorporated Russian culture into the canon of world literature and reviled by the Russian Orthodox Church for his public condemnation of the Church and his later reinterpretations of scripture, most controversially his retelling of the life of Christ *The Gospel in Brief,* published in 1902, a year after his formal excommunication from the Orthodox faith. Saint John of Kronstadt, one of the most beloved Orthodox church fathers of modern times, went so far as to call Tolstoy the "worst heretic of our evil days" and, even more provocatively, "the personification of Satan." Though the publication of *Anna Karenina* in 1878 is often seen as the inflection point after which Tolstoy began to write and think deeply about the philosophy of religion, I will analyze themes in his 1869 philosophical novel *War and Peace* that foreshadowed his later, more controversial work. Even in his early work there are present the seeds of the logical empiricism that would inform the prevailing philosophy of science in the early 20th century, and which prompted Pavel Florensky's project to understand the uneasy relationship between logic and faith. In particular, several portions of *War and Peace* dealing with the philosophy of history advocate for a purely empirical explanation of historical events. Tolstoy maintains that the outcomes of wars should be fully deterministic relative to abstract mathematical analysis of the sides in conflict. While this project is so complex as to be completely intractable, Tolstoy still maintains that historical events should theoretically be explicable in this manner. This is a clear departure from Florensky's views on the nature of reality, as we will explore in more detail.

On the other hand, there is also much to be found in Tolstoy's writing that is accordant with Orthodox theology. In particular, there is an omnipresent emphasis on love, humility,

nonviolence, and other basic tenets of the Orthodox faith. While opponents of Tolstoy, most notably Florensky, contested whether Tolstoy's conceptions of these principles were actually concordant with their counterparts in the context of Orthodox Christianity, it is apparent that these essentially good conceptions were not the sole nor primary reasons for Tolstoy's excommunication. Indeed, Tolstoy never expressed unbelief in God or his teachings and remained a Christian (though not Orthodox) until his death – rather much of his discontent with Orthodoxy was with the organization of the Church itself, and with what he perceived as a perversion of the teachings in Christ in order to promote class inequality, nationalism, and violence. Even after being excommunicated from the Orthodox Church in 1901, Tolstoy continued to seek truth by means of Orthodoxy, famously visiting and consulting with elders at the Optina Monastery (upon which the monastery in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* was based) several times until his death in 1908 [2]. However, Tolstoy's rift with Orthodoxy went far beyond these (perhaps justifiable) concrete objections and ventured into discontent with the theological basis of some of the central mysteries of the Orthodox faith: most infamously his explicit rejection of the triunal nature of the Holy Trinity, perhaps *the* central antinomy in Orthodox Christianity. From his 1880 essay "Critique of Dogmatic Theology" [3]:

> [B]eing the most important of all the Christian dogmas, the dogma about the Most Holy Trinity is at the same time the most incomprehensible. That is the very reason why I thirst so much, if not for an explanation, at least for an expression which would be comprehensible. If it is entirely incomprehensible, there can be no answer.

Speaking more directly to his desire for rational certainty in religious belief, he continues a few pages later

> There are absolutely no proofs in Scripture in confirmation of the Trinity...I cannot believe that God, who has revealed himself to me in such a senseless, wild expression as that "I am one and three, and I am the Father and the Son, and I am the Spirit," should not have given me in his Scripture, or in his Tradition, or in my soul, any means to understand what it signifies, but has condemned me, for the solution of the question about God and my salvation, to have recourse

> to no other means than believing the argument of the Orthodox Theology against the rationalists, and repeating, without comprehension of what I am saying, the words which the Orthodox Theology will dictate to me.

before concluding at last, "I reject this dogma. I cannot help rejecting it, because, by accepting it, I should be renouncing the consciousness of my rational soul and the cognition of God."

Belief in the nature of the Trinity is of course one of the most common sources of doubt for Christians, as its *defining feature* is its incomprehensibility to a finite mind. As referenced above, Tolstoy is aware of the "conventional" Orthodox justification of this mystery. Discussions of God's nature in Orthodoxy are overwhelmingly *apophatic*, *i.e.* composed of negative characterizations of His *ousia*, or essence. Note that the characterization of God thus obtained is *not* incomplete or indirect in its nature. From Vladimir Lossky's *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* [4]

> The perfect way, the only way which is fitting in regard to God, who is of His very nature unknowable, is the second [apophaticism]—which leads us finally to total ignorance. All knowledge has as its object that which is. Now God is beyond all that exists. In order to approach Him it is necessary to deny all that is inferior to Him, that is to say, all that which is. If in seeing God one can know what one sees, then one has not seen God in Himself but something intelligible, something which is inferior to Him. It is by unknowing (**ἀγνωσία**) that one may know Him who is above every possible object of knowledge.

This is the type of Orthodox response that Tolstoy rejects outright, insofar as he is unwilling to relinquish his rational agency in the justification of belief. Florensky views Tolstoy's unshakeable dependence on rationality as nothing less than blasphemous. Addressing Tolstoy's *Confessions* directly in his major work *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth,* Florensky goes so far as to say that maintaining this so-called "rational faith" entails nothing less than atheism:

> But so-called "rational" faith, faith with rational proofs, faith according to Tolstoy's formula, "I want to understand in such a way that every unexplainable proposition would appear to me a necessity of reason," such faith is a harsh, cruel stony

> growth in the heart, which keeps the heart from God. Such faith is a slander against God, a monstrous product of human egotism, which desires to subordinate even God to itself. There are many kinds of atheism, but the worst is the so-called rational faith. It is the worst, for, besides the rejection of the object of faith ("things not seen" [Heb. 11:1]), it is hypocritical, accepts God but rejects His very essence, His "invisibility," i.e., His suprarationality.

The hypocrisy referred to by Florensky is reminiscent of Ivan Karamazov's infamous "rebellion" in the so-named chapter of the *Brothers Karamazov*. Recall Ivan's discontent with conventional "explanations" of another central mystery of Orthodox theology: the problem of theodicy. His belief in the *existence* of God is not uncertain, but, rather, he is intellectually and emotionally unable to make the leap of accepting God as a benevolent being in light of the suffering present on Earth.

> "While there is still time, I hasten to protect myself, and so I renounce the higher harmony altogether. It's not worth one little tear of even just that one tormented child who beat herself on the chest and prayed in that stinking outhouse to 'dear God' with her unredeemed tears...Besides, they have put too high a price on harmony, we can't afford to pay so much for admission. And so I hasten to return my entrance ticket...It's not God that I don't accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return to him the ticket."

Ivan's rebellion is strikingly similar to Tolstoy's. It is important here to detail what distinguishes these cases of "rebellion" from more commonplace religious skepticism, which is accepted and even encouraged in the Orthodox faith. By willingly and irrevocably "returning the ticket," or by outrightly rejecting the triunal nature of the Trinity while *simultaneously* affirming the existence of God is to willingly turn *away* from God – from an Orthodox perspective, turning away from the Truth is far worse than never attaining to it in the first place. This is the theological concept of *apostasis*: the turning away from God. This *willful defiance* is tantamount to the egotistical belief that God is not a necessary component of a meaningful life; or, in other words, that one can account for the spiritual, moral, and intellectual aspects of his life by referring only to the self. This is closely related to the

Orthodox conception of the sin of pride. Though Florensky is here referring to "rational faith," a similar characterization can be applied to Ivan's "returning of the ticket:"

> But "rational faith" does not desire to reject selfhood. It even asserts that it knows the Truth. But if it has not rejected itself, "rational faith" can have only itself. The truth is known through itself, in no other way. In order to know the Truth, it is necessary to have it, and for this it is necessary to stop being only oneself and to participate in the Truth itself. "Rational faith" is the beginning of satanic pride, the desire not to receive God into oneself, but to try to pass oneself off as God. [5]

Note that Florensky's interpretation of rational faith is well-supported by the works of various church fathers before him – it is far from a radical claim in the pantheon of Orthodox theology. This perspective seems quite harsh at first blush. In Ivan's case, it is difficult to criticize his emotional and intellectual distress at the existence of suffering on earth; it seems to derive from a genuine and compassionate concern for the good of humanity. Similarly, Tolstoy's standoff with the Trinity comes from an honest place of spiritual discontent with the faculties he's been given to understand the world. This discomfort comes, in Kierkegaardian terms, from the unwillingness to make a *movement of faith*. The spiritual unrest experienced by Ivan and Tolstoy is close to what Kierkegaard would describe in *The Sickness Unto Death* as *despair to will to be oneself* [6]. He also calls this the "defiant" or "demonic" mode of despair. This type of despair is presented in contrast to *despair in weakness* or ignorance of one's soul beyond the immediate – to live in demonic despair requires knowledge of the infinite self, but rejects outright the dependence of oneself on God or love from others (which, to Kierkegaard, are quite closely related concepts). In other words, this mode of despair is the most insidious *precisely because* of the knowledge of the existence of God and the infinite, and so requires a voluntary move of defiance. In Ivan's case, this existential agitation led to a complete destruction of his psyche. In Tolstoy's, it led to complete alienation from the Orthodox faith and, by extension, he will ultimately be refused a place in the Orthodox conception of the Kingdom of Heaven. Without the willingness to deny one's rationalism, to make the leap of Kierkegaard's

knight of faith, beings empowered by unconditional belief in God to act independently of human conceptions of rationality or morality, one will never be able to fully escape this despair.

It is no coincidence that the chapter immediately succeeding "Rebellion" is the acclaimed "The Grand Inquisitor," which on its own stands as one of the most important existential texts of the 20th century. This chapter offers the Orthodox answer to Ivan's question, as opposed to Ivan's endless intellectual torment. When faced with the Grand Inquisitor's temptation to mitigate worldly suffering by lessening the agency of humanity, Christ responded in a manner that transcends the rational: with a kiss of love. This will to love that seems to defy "commonsense" is incredibly powerful, as it is an exercise of the free will required to make the leap of faith, and to choose to love God. This is precisely what makes the belief in God meaningful – the fact that it is not an "easy" choice to make, supported only by logical or moral arguments, but that it requires an active will to love.

Note that this reliance on rationality to justify belief was not only Tolstoy's approach to understanding the infinite component of metaphysical reality, but also the finite. Much of *War and Peace* [7], particularly the later chapters, addresses Tolstoy's philosophical view of history itself. One representative excerpt (though there are *many* examples of this type, especially in the novel's infamous second epilogue) is the following

> Only then, expressing known historic facts by equations and comparing the relative significance of this factor, can we hope to define the unknown. Ten men, battalions, or divisions, fighting fifteen men, battalions, or divisions, conquer—that is, kill or take captive—all the others, while themselves losing four, so that on the one side four and on the other fifteen were lost. Consequently the four were equal to the fifteen, and therefore $4x = 15y$. Consequently $x : y = 15 : 4$. This equation does not give us the value of the unknown factor but gives us a ratio between two unknowns. And by bringing variously selected historic units (battles, campaigns, periods of war) into such equations, a series of numbers could be obtained in which certain laws should exist and might be discovered. [7]

This passage was chosen as representative because of the hopelessly naive "4x = 15y"

rhetorical understatement emphasizing just how intractable this problem is in practice. However, Tolstoy's stance is undeniable: he believes that the world and its events are essentially deterministic by nature, and therefore that the free will of the individual is not relevant for determining the course of history. It's worth noting that the passage feels somehow contentless: the account it gives of the world is one that is hopelessly devoid of individual volition and seems like a more or less cold account of the reality of the world. This alone is not quite a fair characterization of Tolstoy's ambition in *War and Peace* – by contrasting this macro conception of history with the intricately detailed accounts of rich lives of individuals that comprise the rest of the novel, he underlines this duality and makes the strong claim that the course of history cannot be directly influenced by the actions of an individual. Though this approach to history was not opposed by the Orthodox Church at the time of publication, in retrospect it's clear to see the seeds that stirred the eventual rift of the author and the church.

Naively, this seems to be a natural extension of another basic virtue in Orthodoxy: humility and selflessness. However, I claim that this form of humility arising from rationality and a belief in mathematical determinism is quite distinct from the Orthodox conception of humility, insofar as it foregoes the divinely privileged status of humanity as individuals with free will in favor of a form of radical self-denial that places human nature as indistinguishable from or even subordinate to that of a plant or an animal. This claim is supported by another early work of Tolstoy, published well before he laid out his religious convictions explicitly. In the beautifully written 1859 short story *Three Deaths,* Tolstoy gives accounts of the events preceding and following the deaths of (1) a noblewoman, (2) a *muzhik* or peasant, and (3) a tree. These accounts are given in perceived order of "grace." In a letter to his cousin [7], Tolstoy gave an explicit account of the moral of the parable-like tale:

> The noblewoman is pathetic and disgusting, because she lied her entire life and continues to lie before death. Christianity, as she understands it, does not resolve for her the question of life and death. Why die, when you want to live? She believes with her imagination and intellect in Christianity's promise of the future, but her entire being rears up, and there is no other comfort (except a false Christian one), – and the place

> is taken. She is disgusting and pathetic. The muzhik dies calmly, exactly because he isn't a Christian. His religion is different, although by custom he performed the Christian rites; his religion is nature, with whom he lived...and he knew this law well; this law, from which he never turned away, like the noblewoman did, he directly and simply looked it in the face...The tree dies quietly, honestly, and beautifully. Beautifully, because it does not lie or break; it is not scared or sorry."

An uncertain though interesting conclusion we may draw from this explanation is that the tree's death was in Tolstoy's eyes the most "Christian," in that the noblewoman's death was informed by a "false Christianity," the *muzhik* is a pagan, and, seeing as Tolstoy wrote this story in the context of his understanding of Christianity, we may assume that his depiction of a graceful or joyous death, as that of the tree, is meant to portray the Christian ideal. Whether or not the attitude of the tree is intended as an allegory depicting the "correct" view of human death is immaterial; the account of the death given the highest privilege by Tolstoy is devoid of the will. This distinction is a bit subtle, as the Orthodox perspective is certainly not one fraught with egotism, but instead it asserts that the will of the individual carries legitimate spiritual weight.

Similarly, the form of the principle of love advocated by Tolstoy in his later years is distinct from the Orthodox perspective. Again from Florensky [2]:

> Absolute Truth is known in love, but the word "love," as we have already explained, is understood here not in a subjectively psychological sense but in an objectively metaphysical one. It is not the case that love of one's brother is the content of the Truth as the Tolstoyans and suchlike religious nihilists affirm. It is not the case that this love of one's brother exhausts everything... The metaphysical nature of love lies in the supralogical overcoming of the naked self-identity "I = I" and in the going out of oneself. And this happens when the power of God's love flows out into another person and tears apart in him the bonds of finite human selfhood.

Similarly, the point is that the act of loving another is spiritually significant *precisely because* it is the will of a unique individual. This

idea is echoed in Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of the "once-occurrent" event of being, explored in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* [8]. This notion of "once-occurrent" refers not only to the event of a finite life being infinitely significant because its finitude allows for struggle and spiritual growth, but also to the fact that a single instance of an act of love or kindness has infinite significance as a once-occurrent event in the universe, in that the participants are uniquely answerable for their actions, and thus take complete responsibility for their will. In other words, there is a spiritual imperative to be accountable for our actions, and in particular to not undervalue the significance of an act by stepping outside of oneself in a Tolstoyan act of self-denial.

Ludwig Wittgenstein was greatly influenced by Tolstoy's later writings, in particular *The Gospel in Brief*. While this is influence is usually seen as manifesting in the later parts of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* dealing directly with the limits imposed by logic on ethics and morality, it may also be the case that the logical certainty Tolstoy sought to justify his beliefs informed the earlier portions of the *Tractutus* on the nature of logic and the limits of science and rationalism itself, which went on to serve as a foundation for the philosophical movements of logical positivism and logical empiricism emphasizing that the meaningfulness of statements about reality is tantamount to their formulation in logically consistent terms and verifiability by empirical means. This movement toward empiricism in interpreting science was the intellectual background in which Florensky wrote his *Pillars*, in which he attempted to reject this view and unify more satisfactorily the nature of logic and rationalism with the spiritual component of human experience. All of this is of course not to say that Tolstoy's work is not of intellectual or philosophical significance, but rather that his eventual falling-out with the Orthodox Church had roots reaching far beyond his *Confessions* and *The Gospel in Brief*, which are usually indicated as the clearest evidence of his discontent with Orthodoxy. Furthermore, this dispute with Orthodox theology was furnished not merely by his explicit critiques of Orthodox dogma itself, but also by a rationalist perspective on even secular aspects of the world that are fundamentally incompatible with Orthodoxy.

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