

Reason and Religion

Leo Tolstoy

Originally published in 1895. This version translated in
1904.

You ask me:

1. Should people who are not particularly advanced mentally seek an expression in words for the truths of the inner life, as comprehended by them?

2. Is it worth while in one's inner life to strive after complete consciousness?

3. What are we to be guided by in moments of struggle and wavering, that we may know whether it is indeed our conscience that is speaking in us, or whether it is reflection, which is bribed by our weakness? (The third question I for brevity's sake expressed in my own words, without having changed its meaning, I hope.)

These three questions in my opinion reduce themselves to one,—the second, because, if it is not necessary for us to strive after a full consciousness of our inner life, it will be also unnecessary and impossible for us to express in words the truths which we have grasped, and in moments of wavering we shall have nothing to be guided by, in order to ascertain whether it is our conscience or a false reflection that is speaking within us. But if it is necessary to strive after the greatest consciousness accessible to human reason (whatever this reason may be), it is also necessary to express the truths grasped by us in words, and it is these expressed truths which have been carried into full consciousness that we have to be guided by in moments of struggle and wavering. And so I answer your radical question in the affirmative, namely, that every man, for the fulfilment of his destiny upon earth and for the attainment of the true good (the two things go together), must strain all the forces of his mind for the purpose of elucidating to himself those religious bases by which he lives, that is, the meaning of his life.

I have frequently met among illiterate earth-diggers, who have to figure out cubic contents, the wide-spread conviction that the mathematical calculation is deceptive, and that it is not to be trusted. Either because they do not know any mathematics, or because the men who figured things out mathematically for them had frequently consciously or unconsciously deceived them, the opinion that mathematics was inadequate and useless for the calculation of measures has established itself as an undoubted truth which they think it is even unnecessary to prove. Just such an opinion has established itself among, I shall say it boldly, irreligious men,—an opinion that reason cannot solve any religious questions,—that the application of reason to these questions is the chief cause of errors, that the solution of religious questions by means of reason is criminal pride.

I say this, because the doubt, expressed in your questions, as to whether it is necessary to strive after consciousness in our religious convictions, can be based only on this supposition, namely, that reason cannot be applied to the solution of religious questions. However, such a supposition is as strange and obviously false as the supposition that calculation cannot settle any mathematical questions.

God has given man but one tool for the cognition of himself and his relation to the world,—there is no other,—and this tool is reason, and suddenly he is told that he can use his reason for the elucidation of his domestic, economic, political, scientific, artistic questions, but not for the elucidation of what it is given him for. It turns out that for

the elucidation of the most important truths, of those on which his whole life depends, a man must by no means employ reason, but must recognize these truths as beyond reason, whereas beyond reason a man cannot cognize anything. They say, "Find it out, through revelation, faith." But a man cannot even believe outside of reason. If a man believes in this, and not in that, he does so only because his reason tells him that he ought to believe in this, and not to believe in that. To say that a man should not be guided by reason is the same as saying to a man, who in a dark underground room is carrying a lamp, that, to get out from this underground room and find his way, he ought to put out his lamp and be guided by something different from the light.

But, perhaps, I shall be told, as you say in your letter, that not all men are endowed with a great mind and with a special ability for expressing their thoughts, and that, therefore, an awkward expression of their thoughts concerning religion may lead to error. To this I will answer in the words of the Gospel, "What is hidden from the wise is revealed to babes." This saying is not an exaggeration and not a paradox, as people generally judge of those utterances of the Gospel which do not please them, but the assertion of a most simple and unquestionable truth, which is, that to every being in the world a law is given, which this being must follow, and that for the cognition of this law every being is endowed with corresponding organs. And so every man is endowed with reason, and in this reason there is revealed to him the law which he must follow. This law is hidden only from those who do not want to follow it and who, in order not to follow it, renounce reason and, instead of using their reason for the cognition of the truth, use for this purpose the indications, taken upon faith, of people like themselves, who also reject reason.

But the law which a man must follow is so simple that it is accessible to any child, the more so since a man has no longer any need of discovering the law of his life. Men who lived before him discovered and expressed it, and all a man has to do is to verify them with his reason, to accept or not to accept the propositions which he finds expressed in the tradition, that is, not as people, who wish not to fulfil the law, advise us to do, by verifying reason through tradition, but by verifying tradition through reason. Tradition may be from men, and false, but reason is certainly from God, and cannot be false. And so, for the cognition and the expression of truth, there is no need of any especial prominent capacity, but only of the faith that reason is not only the highest divine quality of man, but also the only tool for the cognition of truth.

A special mind and gifts are not needed for the cognition and exposition of the truth, but for the invention and exposition of the lie. Having once departed from the indications of reason, men heap up and take upon faith, generally in the shape of laws, revelations, dogmas, such complicated, unnatural, and contradictory propositions that, in order to expound them and harmonize them with the lie, there is actually a need of astuteness of mind and of a special gift. We need only think of a man of our world, educated in the religious tenets of any Christian profession,—Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant,—who wants to elucidate to himself the religious tenets inculcated upon him since childhood, and to harmonize them with life,—what a complicated men-

tal labour he must go through in order to harmonize all the contradictions which are found in the profession inoculated in him by his education: God, the Creator and the good, created evil, punishes people, and demands redemption, and so forth, and we profess the law of love and of forgiveness, and we punish, wage war, take away the property from poor people, and so forth, and so forth.

It is for the unravelling of these contradictions, or rather, for the concealment of them from ourselves, that a great mind and special gifts are needed; but for the discovery of the law of our life, or, as you express it, in order to bring our faith into full consciousness, no special mental gifts are needed,—all that is necessary is not to admit anything that is contrary to reason, not to reject reason, religiously to guard reason, and to believe in nothing else. If the meaning of a man's life presents itself to him indistinctly, that does not prove that reason is of no use for the elucidation of this meaning, but only this, that too much of what is irrational has been taken upon faith, and that it is necessary to reject everything which is not confirmed by reason.

And so my answer to your fundamental question, as to whether it is necessary to strive after consciousness in our inner life, is this, that this is the most necessary and important work of our life. It is necessary and important because the only rational meaning of our life consists in the fulfilment of the will of God who sent us into this life. But the will of God is not recognized by any special miracle, by the writing of the law on tablets with God's finger, or by the composition of an infallible book with the aid of the Holy Ghost, or by the infallibility of some holy person or of an assembly of men,—but only by the activity of the reason of all men who in deeds and words transmit to one another the truths which have become more and more elucidated to their consciousness. This cognition has never been and never will be complete, but is constantly increased with the movement of humanity: the longer we live, the more clearly do we recognize God's will and, consequently, what we ought to do for its fulfilment. And so I think that the elucidation by any man (no matter how small he himself and others may consider him to be—it is the little ones who are great) of the whole religious truth, as it is accessible to him, and its expression in words (since the expression in words is the one unquestionable symptom of a complete clearness of ideas) is one of the most important and most sacred duties of man.

I shall be very much pleased if my answer shall satisfy you even in part.

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A critique of his ideas & actions



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Originally published in 1895. This version translated in 1904.

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