

## SOME SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TOLSTOY'S CONCEPTS OF IDENTITY AND VOCATION AND THEIR PARALLELS IN HINDUISM

Dragan Milivojevic  
University of Oklahoma

For Tolstoy, the study of major world religions was not a matter of the mind, a scientific and objective investigation of their principles and tenets, but a matter of the heart which should answer such vital questions for Tolstoy as Who am I? Where am I going? Tolstoy searched far and wide for an answer to these questions in his native Orthodox Christianity as well as in Oriental religions, including Hinduism.

An attempt is made here to compare Tolstoy's own answers to these fundamental questions with those provided by certain schools of Hinduism in view of presenting points of similarity and difference. Tolstoy's interest in Hinduism is selective, for him, Hinduism is an all-embracing concept, where differences among schools and movements are not clearly perceived and considered.

### Identity in Tolstoy's Interpretation

Identity and vocation<sup>1</sup> are two coordinates of human life which indicate "consciousness of one's position in the universe (mir) and the actions that follow there from" (35, 170, 1902).<sup>2</sup> Human identity can be located in one of the two conceptions of the self, the "animal self" and the "spiritual self." The former is framed by our body and lives through the body and its desires. The "animal self" consists in physical separation from our fellow human beings and spiritual separation from our divine source and it is perishable. The latter is the seat of our eternal soul; it is our divine self and the connection to our divine source. In general terms, Tolstoy's quest at human perfection is demonstrated in the transition from the "animal self" to the "spiritual self" representing a merger with the divine source. Tolstoy's fictional characters often in adverse circumstances of suffering, illness, and death find who they are and where they are going. Pierre in *War and Peace* and Brekhunov in *Master*

---

<sup>1</sup>The terms "identity" and "vocation" are used by Richard F. Gustafson, *Leo Tolstoy: Resident and Stranger* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986). English translations are taken from Gustafson.

<sup>2</sup>Parenthetical references in arabic numerals refer to the Jubilee Edition, *Polnoe Sobranie Sochineny* (Moscow, 1928-58). The first numeral refers to the volume, the second to the page, and the third to the year of composition or publication.

and Man" are two examples. Human identity in Tolstoy's interpretation is a part of divine identity; it is related as a part is to the whole and this linkage is waiting to be discovered in each individual life. For Tolstoy, the concept of God is always known inwardly through the self's intuition of itself as a part of the whole. "I am a part. He is all. I cannot understand myself except as a part of Him" (52, 49; 1891).

This idea of the synechdochal relationship of the divine to the human is prevalent at different periods of Hinduism. Vivekananda, a neo-Hinduist and a contemporary of Tolstoy's, almost always uses the same words to express this idea, "God is one whole; we are the parts." Hinduism also posits a parallel to the Tolstoyan division between "the animal" and "the spiritual self." Nama-rupa (name and form) is a Hindu concept referring to the whole world as it presents itself to our senses. It corresponds to the Tolstoyan "animal self," which speaks through our body and our senses. All schools and philosophies of Hinduism agree that this physical and sensual orientation will have to be transcended and the ultimate object of thought and the final good of knowledge lies beyond the range of names and forms. The relationship between the divine and the human is one of inclusiveness, "I am part; He is all," is also referred to by Hindu thinkers as a complementary relationship. Thus Namm'alvar speaks about "...the soul which the Lord has condescended to exhibit to me as a mode of himself, for I am related to him as the predicate to the subject, or attribute to substance."<sup>3</sup> Both Tolstoy and the Hinduist thinkers mentioned here, posit a duality between lower and higher states of consciousness and it is the higher state of consciousness which leads to the union with God. The fundamental question is how is this transformation of consciousness from the part to the whole realized, or to use the Tolstoyan dilemma of separation vs. belonging, when does the shift in consciousness from separation to belonging take place, and how is this process brought about? Does this insight and conviction of higher consciousness occur only when the human body is decayed and annihilated, as is the case with Ivan Il'ych or Brekhunov in "Master and Man," and is the physical and mental suffering which many of Tolstoy's fictional characters endure (see Nekhlyudov in Resurrection) a precondition for the attainment of a higher state of consciousness and eventually a merger with the divine source?

As is to be expected an identification with the lower consciousness, the five senses, would not lead to higher

---

<sup>3</sup>R.C. Zaehne, *Hinduism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 128.

## CONCEPTS OF IDENTITY AND VOCATION

consciousness; such an identification will produce chaos, giving us various sensations. The way to reach higher consciousness consists, according to Tolstoy, in reaching outward, in transcending one's "animal self." "The other method is indicated in first having known yourself by loving yourself by thought into another person, animal, plant, even a stone ... this method is what is called poetic talent, it is also love. It is the establishment of the unity among beings which has been as it were destroyed. Go out of yourself and into another. You can go into everything. Everything merges with God, with the All" (52, 101; 1893). Olenin in the Cossacks after reaching the mountains of Caucasus, has this experience of self-transcendence, of a love for all God's world in which he feels himself not an isolated human being but a part of the whole. The opposition between a subject and an object is removed in this state of higher consciousness. Olenin's experience in this state of higher consciousness is ecstatic, devoid of physical and mental suffering, as was the case with Ivan Il'yich, Brekhunov and Nekhlyudov.

Hinduism through its long history has developed different spiritual techniques of reaching higher consciousness and some of them are directly opposed to Tolstoy's method of reaching outward in love. Some of the Yoga spiritual techniques lead to a state of pure isolation in which there is no sense of "I" or "mine," a consciousness of pure detachment both from the world and from other souls. This is a movement from the world in the quest for self-perfection. Tolstoy comments indirectly on the Yogic inward way of self-perfection. "Do not think that this [consciousness of God] destroys the energy of life, that it leads to an ascetic, mental-prayer and to staring at the end of your noses" (55, 49; 1904). This ascetic and self-centered ideal of sainthood in Hinduism was criticized by Neo-Hinduists and bhakti followers as not being conducive to charitable social action and a reaction took place in which the so-called bhakti cults became prominent. bhakti, the religion of loving devotion, of reaching outward to merge with God and through other human beings, is similar to Tolstoy's notion of reaching out in love. In some of bhakti's believers, there is a theme of separation from God accompanied by guilt and belonging to God manifested by ecstasy. For Ramanuja, a bhakti philosopher, there are as many souls as there are bodies to house them, and souls, though like God and like each other are eternal, are distinct from each other and from God, who is their origin. Only on achieving moksha (higher consciousness) can souls enter into possession of their true, timeless nature by reaching God who is the supreme soul. For Ramanuja, God is benevolent and loving; He imprisons souls in matter, Tolstoy's "animal self," only to release them and unite them with Himself. The cause of the soul's imprisonment in matter is unbelief, or lack of faith.

Ramanuja's beliefs are close to Christianity, as well as to Tolstoy's thinking.

Tolstoy favorite metaphors are pipes and conduits. Man is a "channel through which the immobile, non-material, non-temporal, non-spatial principle passes in this life" (57, 173; 1909). and "They speak of saving the soul. One can save only what can perish. The soul cannot perish because it alone exists. One need not save the soul but cleanse it of all that has darkened and defiled it, enlighten it so that God might more and more pass through it" (45, 42; 1910). This is what Gustafson calls salvation through deification, "...a total transfiguration of self, a turning away from all personal passion, desire, perception, and reasoning which returns you to your life in God."<sup>4</sup> In other words, it is a process of turning away from one's animal self and embracing one's spiritual self. This process does not entail accumulation and acquisition; it is a negative, inward action of introspection and purification which brings it about.

The converse of this process of transformation, which results in unity with the divine source, is a state of separation from it, which is sin as Tolstoy understands, an act of separation from the God of Life and Love and a violation of the divine principle of love. Tolstoy calls this separation from God the "dissociation of people from God and each other" (63, 114; 1883) and his own personal crises bear testimony to the sense of acute isolation and guilt which such mental states produce. "All night and early morning I was visited with what seemed an unprecedented state of coldness, doubt of everything, of God, of the truth of my understanding of the meaning of life...it was all a punishment for unkind, unloving feelings which I allowed myself in the preceeding days. And it serves me right" (57, 131; 1909).

Just as with Tolstoy, some of the Tamil Bhakti followers from South India show an intense sense of personal guilt in their separation from God; human beings, as they exist apart from God, are evil and corrupt, the slaves of their egoism.

Evil, all evil, my race, evil my qualities all,  
Great am I only in sin, evil is even my good,  
Evil my innermost self, foolish, avoiding the pure,  
Beast am I not, yet the ways of the beast I never forsake.

### Vocation

---

<sup>4</sup>Gustafson, p. 104.

<sup>5</sup>Quoted in Zaehner, p. 132, from the poet Apar in the collection *Devaram*.

## CONCEPTS OF IDENTITY AND VOCATION

Man's vocation in life is to do the will of God. Since man cannot grasp the will of God in its entirety one must look for some signs that God's will is being followed. Tolstoy mentions three such signs: (1) the absence of suffering, (2) the absence of hostility in oneself or toward oneself, (3) the sense of movement or growth.

One's vocation to do the will of God, the movement of growth, proceeds from one's positive identity with a higher state of consciousness which is an imperative for action. God wills and gives and man "collaborates." "Nothing spiritual is acquired spiritually, neither a religious sense, nor love, nor anything. The spiritual is created through material life, in space and time. The spiritual is created by doing" (54, 121; 1902). The mowing scene (iii, iv-v) in *Anna Karenina* is a concrete image of that spiritual endeavour. Levin begins his mowing in a self-conscious way as an effort and he ends it unconsciously in a state of self-forgetting. "You can forget yourself in plowing, mowing, or sewing. And in this way you must forget yourself and all of life, in the divine task. Don't ask yourself what will come of my labor, what will become of me after death, but give yourself to the task with the same--be it love or desire to do good--with which you plow or sew" ( 51, 76; 1890).

Selfless action, which Tolstoy advocates as man's vocation, resembles the Hinduist way of karma-Yoga. In the *Bhagavad-Gita* three paths of the absolute are offered to the man who seeks liberation, the path of knowledge (jnana), the path of action (karma), and the path of bhakti (loving devotion). Karma Yoga requires that the individual continue carrying on with his usual duties and activities, but with a new attitude of detachment from their fruits, from the possible gains and losses that they will entail. The world is not abandoned, as it is in the different Hinduist ascetic practices, but the will of the individual is united in action with the universal ground, not with the vicissitudes of the suffering body. "Set thy heart upon thy work, but never on its reward. Work not for a reward; but never cease to do thy work" and "Do thy work...free from selfish desires, be not moved in success or failure...."<sup>6</sup>

Tolstoy extends the path of bhakti not only to God as it is understood in Hinduism, but also to human beings, who participate in the divine creation. This is Tolstoy's path of love and compassion which is expressed in his fiction and writing. Tolstoy distinguishes between two kinds of love:

---

<sup>6</sup>*The Bhagavad Gita*, trans. by Juan Mascaro (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 2, 47 and 49 (p. 52).



love of and love for.<sup>7</sup> The former is personal and exclusive, centering on one person or object; the latter is universal and manifests itself as God's law, or compassion. Gerasim, the servant of Ivan Il'yich, sees in Ivan's predicament of illness and death a universal human fate, which deserves a universal feeling of compassion extended to all human beings who are or who will share Ivan's fate. Gustafson sees Tolstoy's "Master and Man" as "...an emblematic journey of discovery and a parable of the way to love."<sup>8</sup> Brekhunov is trying to save Nikita from freezing by lying on top of him. Now he knows that "he is Nikita and Nikita is him, that his life is not in himself but in Nikita, that if Nikita is alive, he is alive" (29, 44; 1895). This is a concrete image of the path of love in Tolstoy; humans are so close to each other that they live as one life.

The feeling of universal love which Tolstoy expresses is absent from early Hinduism but in later schools of Hinduism it found its representative in Vivekananda, who was a contemporary of Tolstoy. Vivekananda distinguishes, like Tolstoy, between two kinds of love. The love for our children and wives is for him a necessary animal love, corresponding to Tolstoy's "animal self." It is a selfish kind of love, "the love of" in Tolstoy's words. The love which is perfectly unselfish is God's love, "the love for" in Tolstoy's formulation. Men, if they love unselfishly, should imitate God's love in its impartiality. In Vivekananda's words, "a finite subject cannot love, nor a finite object be loved."<sup>9</sup>

Vivekananda also agrees with Tolstoy's statement that God's will is followed in a sense of movement and growth on the part of an individual who is immersed in the bhakti form of love for God and fellow human beings. Worship and ceremonies are something secondary. Vivekananda writes "Religion is not doctrines, nor dogmas, nor intellectual argumentation; it is being and becoming; it is realisation."<sup>10</sup>

Tolstoy's concept of love is rooted in this concept of being and becoming. It is realized on the part of a particular being in the movement away from his self-centered ego toward God and human beings. The goal is to transfer

---

<sup>7</sup>These are Gustafson's terms in *Resident and Stranger*.

<sup>8</sup>*Resident and Stranger*, p. 197.

<sup>9</sup>Swami Vivekananda, *Religion of Love*, Ramakrishna Math (Calcutta, 1988), p. 20.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 96.

## CONCEPTS OF IDENTITY AND VOCATION

oneself into "everything, to merge with God, with the All" (52, 101; 1893).

Tolstoy's religious and philosophical views have points of similarity and difference with those of Hinduism. The Hindu concept of karma-Yoga (Yoga of the action, the path of action) is echoed in Tolstoy's views on selfless action. The path of bhakti (loving devotion) resembles Tolstoy's love of God and human beings. Tolstoy does not agree with the idealistic concept of classical Hinduism of the world being an illusion (Maya) and of the tendency on the part of some of the followers of this philosophy to withdraw from life and action into asceticism and isolation. It is with the followers of Neo-Hinduism, Vivekananda and his group, who preached bhakti, that Tolstoy found most in common. Tolstoy's assessment of Hinduism refers to Vivekananda's interpretation of Hinduism. "Last night I read books about Hindu faith. It was a superb book about the meaning of life.... Love not yourself but Atman, that is, an infinite spirit, and you will love everybody and you will live with the spirit, freely and blissfully. How happy am I that I am beginning to understand, confirm and feel this not by reason but with the whole soul and most importantly through experience" (57,166; 1909)

When Tolstoy started reading intensely on the subject of Oriental religions and Hinduism in the eighties, his views on "Who am I?" and "Where am I going?" were already formed. He found the confirmation of his views in some of the Hinduist religious writings. The similarity between Tolstoy's views on religion and those of Hinduism are not due to the influence of the latter on the former. The parallelism and the similarities are part of a universal religious and philosophical quest.

## WORKS CITED

The Bhagavad Gita. Translated by Juan Mascaro. London: Penguin Books, 1988.

Gustafson, Richard F. Leo Tolstoy: Resident and Stranger. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.

Tolstoy, L.N. Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii. Moscow: 1928-58.

Vivekananda, (Swami). Religion of Love. Calcutta: Ramakrishna Math, 1988.

Zaehne, R.C. Hinduism. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

