

## Chapter 3

### The doctrinal dispute

*To be like Christ is to be a Christian.*  
William Penn.

THE overall impression one gains from a reading of Tolstoy's philosophical works is that for a final solution to social problems he relied mainly on individual moral change. This is the biblical *metanoia*, generally translated as 'repentance', as good an example as any of the limitations of a word-for-word translation of the gospels, and the need for either a knowledge of Greek or the services of a reliable commentator, or both, if one is to gain an adequate understanding of their message. What should be understood by *metanoia* is either a 'change of mind' or a 'change in the inner man'. Tolstoy himself took the trouble, unusually late in life, to learn Greek, solely to make sure that he had extracted from the gospels everything that could help him, not only with compensating for his dissolute youth, but also with his self-imposed task of contributing to the establishment of the Kingdom of God on Earth in place of the society based historically on the spoliation and violence that he saw about him.

To concentrate his mind to the uttermost, he produced his own translation of the gospels, which differed rather markedly from its predecessors. By these means, he satisfied himself that the core of the Christian message is in *Matthew v, 21-48*, a part of the collection of sayings that we cite collectively as the 'Sermon on the Mount'.<sup>1</sup> Thereafter he was to refer to this passage as the 'Five commandments of Christ'. They are as follows:

1. The Mosaic Law laid down that 'whoever kills shall be liable

to judgment'. Christ extended the prohibition against killing to include what generally leads up to it in individual cases, namely anger. The best texts leave it at that; but others add the two words 'without cause'.

Confronted with this, Tolstoy drew the rational conclusion that the added words destroyed the whole meaning of the rest. He was horrified to discover, on consulting the interpretations of the Fathers of the Church, that their attention was chiefly directed towards explaining when anger is, or is not, excusable. This was to be a significant element in his total disillusionment with the orthodox presentation of Christianity.

2. The Mosaic Law prohibited adultery; but Christ prohibited the very thought of it. He also set his face against the easy process of marriage dissolution (*Deuteronomy xxiv, 1*), whereby a husband may give his wife a certificate of divorce because 'he has found some indecency in her'. Christ went further, and laid it down that divorce is inadmissible 'except on the ground of unchastity'.

Here Tolstoy's taste for unqualified definition, generally so admirable, led him astray. *Parektos logou porneias* really does mean 'except on the ground of unchastity', and applies to the wife. Tolstoy thought it meant 'besides the sin of dissoluteness', and applied to the husband. At the time he put these ideas together (1884), he was fully convinced of the need for marriage and its maintenance intact; but later (1889), when he had quarrelled with his wife over his wish to renounce his property, he turned to the opinion that marriage is an obstacle in the way of a truly Christian life. On this occasion, it is to be feared, his private feelings overcame his philosophical detachment.

3. When it comes to Christ's amendment of the old law concerning oaths, Tolstoy makes a vital observation. Here is the text from *Matthew v, 33-37*:

Again you have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn'. But I say to you, Do not swear at all, ... . Let what you say

be simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything more than this comes of evil.

At first sight, this appeared to Tolstoy to be a self-evident proposition, putting in a general form particular ancient injunctions not to swear by God, by heaven, by the earth, by Jerusalem or by one's own head. Those well-known non-swearers, the Quakers, are more specific, and point out that taking an oath is a confession of a double standard of truth. If I merely say that I will do something or that such and such is so, you believe me at your own risk; but, if I say it on oath, then you may trust me. This evidently is not good enough: satisfactory human relationships require openness and truthfulness.

On second thoughts, after he had consulted the commentators, to whom he ironically acknowledges an obligation, Tolstoy saw more significance in this passage; for they were careful to explain that Christ's words should not be taken to apply to a citizen's oath of loyalty to those in authority. When one considers Christ's habitual attitude of disrespect towards the authorities of his own time, one can see some sense in Tolstoy's opinion that this is an instance of the sinister contemporary alliance between Church and State.

4. The precept of Christ (*Matthew v, 38-41*) annulling the old law of retaliation was, says Tolstoy, the first that he understood, and the one that helped him to understand all the rest. It is therefore worth quoting in full:

Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.

This precept was to occupy a central position in Tolstoy's thought on a variety of subjects, including the unlikely one of economic reform. Whenever he mentioned violence, he would have been thinking of this text, which was closely associated in his mind with the last of Christ's 'five commandments':

5. You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy'. But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ... .

As Tolstoy justly observed, a 'neighbour' in Jewish thought meant a fellow-Jew, and an 'enemy' a member of a hostile foreign nation. The concept was to be put into practice in the furious rebellion against Roman rule that culminated in the mass suicide at Masada in A.D.73. Tolstoy's recognition of the meaning of the contrasting terms made it easier for him, and for us, to see how it is possible to love an enemy; for, after all, to expect someone to love a personal enemy is asking rather too much. Christ himself befriended a Roman centurion; and the parable of the good Samaritan showed how, in certain circumstances, an 'enemy' might come to be a 'neighbour'.

Such was the main thrust of Tolstoy's religious thought. What he rejected may be ascertained in detail from his own version of the gospels, in which anything savouring of the supernatural, from the virgin birth to the ascension, will not be found. He did, however, believe that human life has its origin in an infinite divine source. It was only to be expected that his radical re-interpretation of Christianity would excite comment, from friendly criticism to outright condemnation; and that in fact is what happened.

Aylmer Maude sums up his religious doctrines with evident approval, pointing out that any attempt to define God as a person or persons responsible for the creation of the material universe saddles us with the admission that God created evil as well as good – a difficulty that nobody has as yet managed convincingly to get round. If, on the contrary, we confine ourselves to personal experience, 'we may be as sure as Socrates was that we are in touch with the Eternal Goodness. We know not how to speak of this power within us and outside us, except to say that it is Love: God is Love'.<sup>2</sup>

In another essay,<sup>3</sup> Maude writes about Tolstoy's high opinion of Matthew Arnold's works on religion.<sup>4</sup> The general verdict was to put his poetical works first, his critical works second, and his religious works third; but Tolstoy would reverse

this order. It need not therefore surprise us to see Maude referring to 'personal experience' and a 'power within us and outside us'; for these are palpable reflections of Arnold's thought.

Arnold himself, in an essay on Tolstoy,<sup>5</sup> found much that was 'questionable' among much that was 'ingenious and powerful' in Tolstoy's Biblical exegesis. This too is hardly surprising: we have noticed something questionable ourselves. It cannot, however, have been too serious; for the only point that he wished to make at the time of writing (1887) was that Christianity depends as much on the 'sweetness and reasonableness' of its founder as on 'any series of maxims' that his followers recorded. Despite all else, there is no mistaking the general air of friendly agreement with Tolstoy's doctrines. The two men had met in London in 1861; so it could have been the case with both Arnold and Maude that Tolstoy's vehemence of speech and obvious guilelessness helped to strengthen the impression made on them by his writings.

One of his most modern critics, A.N. Wilson, born too late to have any such advantage, was initially too much at the mercy of his own conventional upbringing to have any sympathy with Tolstoy's freethinking in the matter of religion. In a forty-two page chapter entitled 'The holy man', there appears this significant passage:

... From beginning to end, the New Testament is caught up in mystery. Its difficulties will never be solved by scholars, though there is no harm in their trying. Glints of what the mystery was, and is, are only discernible through worship.

Tolstoy had tried that, but it did not answer. His rationalistic, nineteenth-century knees lacked health until they had stopped genuflecting. But he was enough, *au fond*, a Russian Orthodox to know that he could not refuse to worship without, as it were, divine sanction. And so the Gospels themselves had to be looted and plundered and robbed of the mystery which is their essence.<sup>6</sup>

These are views that Wilson, by his own later admission,<sup>7</sup> would no longer expound. Here is another modern critic, E.B.

Greenwood, but one who is unequivocally on Tolstoy's side:

He does not use the wretched Pascalian argument that we should take holy water and stupefy ourselves if we want to find faith. On the contrary, his whole effort in his religious works is to make a bold attempt to separate the essential truths of the faith he sees around him from the ignorance and superstition in which they are embedded.<sup>8</sup>

Greenwood has used the word 'stupefy', Maude's translation of one of Tolstoy's favourites, to render the French word 'abêtir'. Pascal wrote as follows:

Suivez la manière par où ils ont commencé: c'est en faisant tout comme s'ils croyaient, en prenant de l'eau bénite, en faisant dire des messes, etc. ... Naturellement même cela vous fera croire et vous abêtira.<sup>9</sup>

*Follow the way by which they [i.e. other unbelievers] began: that is, in doing everything as if they believed, taking holy water, having masses said, etc. ... It is only natural that that will make you believe, and will stupefy you.*

It is our impression that many modern church-goers would side with the old Wilson, and claim that the Bible must be accepted or rejected in its entirety. But have they no conception of the period of time, to be counted in thousands of years, and the measureless human labour, that went into its composition? Are we to assume that, without exception, the authors waited for divine inspiration before they performed the equivalent for their time of setting pen to paper? Perhaps such concepts, divorced from common experience, go most of the way towards accounting for the empty pews on Sundays.

All this is a great pity; for, even given a population that was 100 per cent rationalist, the teachings of Christ and the example of his sweet reasonableness could still be of inestimable value. Let us consider an extreme hypothesis, going well beyond Tolstoy's in its rationalism, and supported by the available

evidence. Living matter arose through the action of inter-stellar radiation on primordial slime, and, throughout billions of years, has been progressively modified by the action of this same radiation on the genes of individuals. Inefficient species so evolved have been removed by death. The human story began twenty million years ago when the unspecialised ape *Proconsul* entered the arid African Pliocene Age as a tree-dwelling vegetarian, to emerge after about seventeen or eighteen million non-fossil-bearing years as Raymond Dart's upright-walking carnivorous ape *Australopithecus*, capable of violence against his own kind, and a habitual user of weapons.

In these circumstances, would it not be helpful to regard Christ as a human being endowed with a mutant gene that not only removed his own capacity for hate and violence, but also made him subconsciously aware that these qualities no longer favoured the survival of the human species, but on the contrary tended towards its destruction?

This is a message that is needed more than ever now that the antelope humerus of *Australopithecus* has been succeeded by nuclear missiles, poison gas and deadly viruses. The established Churches still do not feature prominently in opposition to war, even by such means; and indeed the aircraft, named Enola Gay, that dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima was blessed by a U.S. Army chaplain before its departure. In Tolstoy's time the danger had long been apparent; and he inveighed mercilessly against the Russian Orthodox Church for its support of a State based on, and maintained by, violence, and for its specious arguments in favour of neglecting Christian principles on this account. For example, he quotes the argument that the injunction not to resist evil by violence applies only to an individual suffering under it personally. When others are so suffering, it is his duty to do so. He then goes on:

If one's personal judgement is to decide the question of what constitutes danger for other people, there is no case of violence that cannot be justified on the ground of danger threatening somebody.<sup>10</sup>

It need not be supposed that the Russian Orthodox Church is the only one that can be accused of serving the interests of the State by revising the Christian religion. A simple test is to read the Apostles' Creed and to note how it jumps from 'born of the Virgin Mary' to 'suffered under Pontius Pilate', as if nothing worth mentioning had occurred in between. Another is to consider the following passage from the English *Catechism*:

My duty towards my Neighbour is to love him as myself, and to do to all men as I would they should do unto me: To love, honour and succour my father and mother: To honour and obey the King, and all that are put in authority under him: To submit myself to all my governors, teachers, spiritual pastors and masters: To order myself lowly and reverently to all my betters: ... .

The first two injunctions are in the pure spirit of Christianity. The third emphasises family loyalty, the natural source of continuous security from generation to generation. Christ certainly demanded of his immediate companions that they should leave their families and follow him; but this was to meet the exigencies of the first mission, and can hardly be taken as a message for all time. The rest, from 'To honour and obey the King' onwards, is wholly foreign to the spirit of the gospels, and directly contrary to the example set us by Christ in his own life. It can have been composed only with the cynical intention of bending Christian morality to suit the temporal and materialistic requirements of an unscrupulous ruling class, the nature of which will be made more and more plain in due course.

It could also be significant that, whereas the injunction of *Exodus*, xx, 13 is 'Thou shalt not kill', that of the English *Catechism* is 'Thou shalt do no murder'. Some difference must be intended; and the most likely one is that between killing for a personal reason, which is murder and therefore wrong, and killing by the orders of those 'set in authority' under the King, which by the new dispensation becomes permissible. Tolstoy recognised no such difference, and neither, we can be sure, would Christ have done.

There is nothing surprising about any of this when one

considers the circumstances in which the first vernacular catechisms were introduced. Unrest among the peasantry of Europe had been of common occurrence at the time of the Reformation; and, in particular, the Peasants' Revolt in Germany (1524-6) had given the rich and powerful a very nasty shock. It was in response to these events that Martin Luther, who sympathised with the peasants' cause, but not with their methods, produced his two catechisms in 1529. 'Let the people be taught', he said, 'let schools be opened for the poor, let the truth reach them in simple words in their own mother tongue, and they will believe'.

In England, the *Book of Common Prayer*, containing the *Catechism*, fell into disuse during the Civil War, 'the late unhappy confusions' as it is described in the preface, but came out in a new edition 'upon His Majesty's happy Restoration', or, to be quite accurate, two years later in 1662. It was well timed: the ruling classes were soon to be in need of all the ignorant docile men they could muster to fight the Dutch for them, and to lay the foundations of the British Empire in the east.

In Russia, the Orthodox Church re-affirmed its union with the autocratic monarchy at the outbreak of the first world war. The Tsar's manifestos declaring war on Germany and Austria were read out in churches before being posted up outside. They were also read out in the Nikolai Hall of the Winter Palace, Petersburg; and prayers were said before an icon of Our Lady of Kazan. When the Tsar and Tsarina went out on to the balcony overlooking Palace Square, they saw before them a great concourse of royal portraits, national flags and religious banners. The insignia of the Christian religion would not be considered necessary by the new régime, already biding its time.