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ORTHODOXY INSIDE-OUT: HOW CERTAIN ORTHODOX IDEAS ARE REFLECTED IN LEV TOLSTOI'S RELIGIOUS THINKING

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Abstract. Lev Tolstoy developed his religious ideas in conscious opposition to the Orthodox faith in which he was raised. He was deeply imbued with Orthodox thinking and incorporated important elements of Orthodox spirituality into his religious system. However, in its basic structure, his teaching differed significantly from the Orthodox worldview. The elements he took from Orthodox spirituality underwent a radical change of meaning when it was applied to his teaching. Thus, in defining Tolstoy's relationship to the Orthodox Church, we must simultaneously emphasize both continuity and rupture. To say that Tolstoy was influenced by Orthodox spirituality is not to say that he was an Orthodox believer in any way – obviously he was not. Rather, we must acknowledge that in 19th-century Russia, the worldview of the Orthodox Church rubbed off on even some of its most vehement detractors.

In *A Confession*, his first religious text after his spiritual crisis in the late 1870s, Tolstoy argued that in Orthodoxy there is “both truth and falsehood”. This view can be found even in his most viciously anti-Orthodox work, *An examination of Dogmatic Theology*, an almost forgotten book which is important for our understanding Tolstoy's attitude towards Orthodoxy. In this article, I focus on two points: his anthropology and his view on how we can understand God. I combine textual and contextual analysis, that is, a careful reading of this book with a reading of the theological treatises on which he based his criticism.

Keywords: Lev Tolstoy; Russian Orthodoxy; Orthodox spirituality; Christian Anthropology; Theology; Metropolitan Makarii (Bulgakov).

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ПРАВОСЛАВИЕ НАИЗНАНКУ: ОТРАЖЕНИЕ НЕКОТОРЫХ ПРАВОСЛАВНЫХ ИДЕЙ В РЕЛИГИОЗНОМ МЫШЛЕНИИ ЛЬВА ТОЛСТОГО

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Аннотация. Лев Толстой развивал свои религиозные идеи в сознательном противостоянии православной вере, в которой он был воспитан. Он был глубоко проникнут православным мышлением и включил важные элементы православной духовности в свою религиозную систему. Однако по своей основной структуре его учение существенно отличалось от православного мировоззрения. Элементы, которые он выбрал из православной духовности, претерпели радикальное изменение смысла применительно к его учению. Таким образом, определяя отношение Толстого к Православной Церкви, мы должны одновременно подчеркивать и преемственность, и разрыв. Сказать, что Толстой находился под влиянием право-

славной духовности, – не то же самое, что сказать, что он в какой-то мере был православным верующим, – очевидно, что это не так. Скорее, мы признаем, что в России XIX века мировоззрение Православной церкви стиралось даже у некоторых из ее самых ярых сторонников.

В «Исповеди», своем первом религиозном тексте после духовного кризиса в конце 1870-х годов, Толстой утверждал, что в православии есть «и правда, и ложь». Эту точку зрения можно найти даже в его самой злобной антиправославной работе «Исследование догматического богословия», почти забытой книге, важной для понимания отношения Толстого к православию. В этой статье я сосредоточусь на двух моментах: его антропологии и его взгляде на то, как мы можем понять Бога. Я сочетаю текстуальный и контекстуальный анализ, то есть внимательное чтение этой книги с чтением богословских трактатов, на которых он основывал свою критику.

Ключевые слова: Лев Толстой; русское православие; православная духовность; христианская антропология; богословие; митрополит Макарий (Булгаков).

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Lev Tolstoi developed his religious ideas in conscious opposition to the Orthodox faith in which he had been brought up. This opposition was strong and real – but he also clearly took over and implicitly accepted certain aspects of Orthodox theology and spirituality. In *A Confession* (1884), Tolstoi's first religious tract after his deep spiritual crisis in the late 1870s, he claimed that Orthodoxy consisted of both truth and falsehood; he saw it as his task to disentangle the two aspects, digging out the бесценные жемчужины wisdom from what he called the «мешок вонючей грязи» of Orthodoxy [Tolstoi PSS 24: 807]. Often he drew a distinction between the teachings of the official Church, which he rejected, and the living faith of simple Russian believers, which he admired.

My starting point for examining the relationship between Tolstoi and Orthodoxy is that any critique of religion must necessarily be a critique of the religious forms and ideas in which one was raised and socialized. Religion *per se* does not exist – only specific, historical religions; likewise, there is no timeless, ahistorical critique of religion. Any church influences its opponents both positively and negatively – by the elements they take over from it (usually without acknowledging this), and since such rebellion is provoked by precisely the features that are characteristic of that particular faith or denomination.

Tolstoi was deeply imbued with Orthodox ways of thinking, and incorporated important elements of Orthodox spirituality into his own religious system¹. In its basic structure,

however, his teaching differed significantly from the Orthodox worldview. The elements he selected from Orthodox spirituality underwent a radical change of meaning when applied to his message. Thus, in determining the relationship of Tolstoi to the Orthodox Church we must emphasize both continuity and break at the same time. To say that Tolstoi was influenced by Orthodox spirituality is not the same as saying that he was in any way an Orthodox believer – clearly he was not. Rather, it recognizes that in 19th century Russia, the worldview of the Orthodox Church rubbed off even on some of its most vehement detractors.

Such analysis of the sources of a thinker's worldview goes beyond the traditional pursuit of conceptual “loans”. Rather than “loan”, we should to speak of ideational “heritage”. Applying this metaphor to Tolstoi, we can say that, although the Russian Orthodox Church sought to “disinherit” Tolstoi spiritually with the Circular letter it promulgated against him in 1901, which is normally referred to as his “excommunication”, similarly, Tolstoi may be said to have renounced any inheritance from the Church in which he had grown up, but in both cases this turned out to be only partial. It is indeed possible to break out of the intellectual universe in which one was brought up, but certain mental structures will normally remain.

Iurii Lotman and Boris Uspenskii of the Tartu–Moscow school of cultural semiotics developed a theory of cultural change that

¹ I have previously examined how Tolstoi drew on three distinctly Orthodox forms of spirituality, the «elder»,

(*starets*), and the holy wanderer (*strannik*) and the holy fool (*iurodovyi*). See Kolstø 2008; Kolstø 2010; and Kolstø and Schmid, 2013.

may provide a guide for understanding Tolstoi's relationship to Orthodoxy. They argued that not only languages but entire cultures may be analysed as *systems of signs*. Russia, they noted, had several times undergone abrupt cultural shifts when, in the course of a few decades, the values of one generation were supplanted by their opposites. Superficially, this interpretation may seem a mere repetition of Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev's thesis that Russians are maximalists who are constantly thrown from one extreme to another [see e.g. Berdiaev 1970]. However, the semioticians emphasized not only the rupture, but also the *continuity* that is preserved over apparently yawning cultural gaps. The signs of the old culture are not automatically discarded: sometimes they live on in new forms and with new meanings which the semiotician may disentangle.

In *Historia sub specie semiotica* [1974] Boris Uspenskii discussed the cultural rupture under Peter the Great, seeking to understand the semiotic contrast between the "medieval" and "modern" in Russian culture and what happens when they collide. Contemporary reactions to the shocking cultural and social innovations introduced by Peter were emphatically and unanimously negative – nor could they have been otherwise, Uspenskii maintained. Peter acted as a blasphemer and an iconoclast, and for this he was rewarded by his devout Orthodox subjects with the title "Antichrist". However, in his iconoclasm Peter deliberately – perhaps inevitably – employed and inverted the signs and the symbols of the old culture. From one point of view, Uspenskii claims, Peter's behaviour was not a cultural revolution, but appears as "anti-texts or minus-behaviour within the bounds of the same culture ... However paradoxical this might be, Peter's behaviour in large measure did not exceed the bounds of traditional ideas and norms; it entirely confined itself within these limits, but only by means of a negative sign" [Uspenskii 1988: 112].

In "Binary Models in the Dynamics of Russian Culture" Lotman and Uspenskii returned to this topic. In their view, Peter's cultural revolution was the most egregious example of a more general tendency in Russian history. (Lotman and Uspenskii did not mention the October Revolution, probably because Soviet censorship would not have accepted it.)

They saw Russian culture as characterized by a high degree of binary tensions between the old and the new, between true faith and false, between the norm and breach of the norm. Even after such a breach, much of the old lives on, albeit often in unconscious and distorted form. "Change occurs as a radical negation of the preceding state. The new does not arise from a structurally 'unused' reserve, but results from a transformation of the old, a process of turning it inside out" [Lotman and Uspenskii 1985: 33].

As a scathing critic of the Church and society of 19th century Russia, Tolstoi had a highly developed ability to see through and dissect fundamental aspects of "the social reality" – indeed, that was among his most important qualities as a writer of fiction. The Russian formalist and literary theoretician Viktor Shklovskii highlighted the "technique of alienation" (*prim ostraneniia*) as a major tool in Tolstoi's prose writing. In his novels, Tolstoi often offers purely external descriptions of well-known social structures and institutions, as if he were an alien from Mars unacquainted with the conventional meanings assigned by society. As an example, Shklovskii referred to battle scenes as well as theatre scenes in *War and Peace* [Shklovskii 1963]. With such "tricks" or "devices" (*primy*) Tolstoi created an effect of surprise and distance. Here we should note that, for Tolstoi, alienation was not just a technique he employed in his fictional writings, but also an essential element in his criticism of religion, culture and society. Through "uncomprehending" descriptions of institutions, symbolic systems and power structures, he "unmasked" them as man-made constructions – as in the communion scene in *Resurrection*, where the Body of Christ (the communion bread) is referred to as "a piece of loaf" and the chalice as "a cup of wine" [Tolstoi PSS 32: 134]. By deliberately removing the sacramental act from its familiar context and refusing to recognize the convention, Tolstoi deprived it of any value.

The theory of alienation makes a valuable contribution to the understanding of Tolstoi's criticism of religion¹. However, we must bear in mind that Tolstoi was *not* a stranger in the culture and society he wanted to dissect, although he often experienced it as such. On

¹ For many more examples of Tolstoi's use of defamiliarization as a subversive device, see Christoyannopoulos 2019.

the contrary, he had deep insights into precisely the culture and society of Russia. Perhaps the alienation technique as a deliberate and effective method can be skilfully employed *only* by a person who possesses intimate knowledge of the phenomenon he or she wants to expose. Only such a person can give a description of the outside that causes the readers to pause and to start questioning what they had previously taken for granted. But even more important in our context is that as a non-Martian it was as impossible for Tolstoi, as for anyone else, to dissect *all* sides of the “socially constructed reality” he experienced around him. Also the rebel is a child of his time and his culture, and cannot avoid taking parts of it for granted.

The claim that Tolstoianism contains a strong layer of Orthodoxy has emerged from time to time in the literature, but mostly as casual remarks in passing. For instance, in 1928 Nikolai Berdiaev wrote:

«Л. Толстой – русский до мозга костей и мог возникнуть только на русской православной почве, хотя и изменил православия» [Бердяев 1928: 77].

“L. Tolstoi is a Russian to the marrow and could arise only on Russian Orthodox soil, even though he made changes to Orthodoxy” [Berdiaev 1928: 77]. However, Berdiaev did not elaborate on this, and almost 60 years were to pass before any researchers tried to underpin this claim with serious research. In 1986, Richard Gustafson published *Leo Tolstoy: Resident and Stranger*, a major attempt to understand Tolstoi’s ideas with Orthodox theology as the crucial interpretive key. Although Gustafson did not refer to Berdiaev, his main thesis was precisely that a close relationship existed between Tolstoi’s worldview and Orthodox theology. He concluded: “Tolstoi may not be an Orthodox thinker, but certainly he is an Eastern Christian artist and theologian within the culture of Russian Orthodoxy” [Gustafson 1986: 457].

Gustafson’s most important insight, I believe, is expressed already in the title of his book: in the Russian religious tradition Tolstoi was at the same time both a “resident” and a “stranger”. It is in this duality that we must look for explanations of Tolstoi’s distinct character as an author and thinker [Gustafson 1986: 13]. Gustafson based his analysis on a “close reading” of Tolstoi’s fictional works and diaries and then compared the views expressed in Tolstoi’s writings with Orthodox

theology. In order to find appropriate sources of this theology, Gustafson went to two extremes: to ancient church texts, and to works written in the 20th century by some Orthodox and some Western scholars. The Orthodox theologians of the intervening period, including Tolstoi’s own century, he consistently overlooked. This, Gustafson explained, was because, in his view, “what passed as theology were but slightly dressed-up versions of Western systems of thought, Catholic and Protestant” [Gustafson 1986, xi]. However, Gustafson made no attempt to explain how Tolstoi was able to penetrate beyond these Western-inspired thought systems and find the true Orthodox belief behind them. Implicit in Gustafson’s ahistorical approach is the claim that Orthodox thinking and spirituality have not undergone any significant changes over the centuries.

Beyond doubt, if there is no intellectual affinity, all attempts to prove a genetic relationship must fail. However, such correspondence will have significance only if the common elements found in both Tolstoi’s writings and Orthodoxy are distinctive features and not just general ideas. One example: it does not take us very far when Gustafson claims that “Tolstoy’s God of Life and Love is an Eastern Christian God. The concept of God as an abstract idea of absolute being has been replaced by a God who dwells in the world of change even as He transcends it” [Gustafson 1986: 108]. This is no doubt true, but the view that God is at the same time *in* creation and above it, both immanent and transcendent, lies at the heart of both Western and Eastern mainstream theology. Tolstoi did indeed share this view – but it is methodologically very difficult to claim that this is a specifically Orthodox heirloom.

Only one other modern researchers, Georgii Orekhanov, has set out to discuss Tolstoi’s thinking and writing against an Orthodox background in any detail [Orekhanov 2010: 2016]. He has devoted a lifetime of study to the subject, but his apologetic approach makes it less valuable than it could otherwise have been. Through his research, he wants to demonstrate that Tolstoi was “a prophet without honor” (the title of one of his books), and that the Russian Orthodox Church acted “correctly” in excommunicating him. While Orekhanov’s works contain much valuable information,

this normative starting point means that his research belongs more to polemical than to academic literature.

Lies and truth.

After his spiritual crisis in the late 1870s, Tolstoi for a while thought that he had found a new meaning in life in the Orthodox faith and for almost two years tried to live as a devout Orthodox believer. However, his relationship to Orthodox faith as he knew it was never unproblematic – neither before nor after his break with the Church. As long as he remained a practicing Orthodox, he was not able to embrace it wholeheartedly; later, he could not fully liberate himself from it. Orthodoxy contained a duality, he maintained: it was «истина тончайшими нитями переплетена с ложью» [Толстой ПСС 23: 53] (“truth interwoven with lies with the finest threads”) [Tolstoi PSS 23: 53]¹.

The idea that there is the duality in Orthodoxy was not a chance thought or passing idea in Tolstoi's thinking. On the contrary, it stands as the main theme of the last three chapters of *A Confession*, the chord on which that important work ends. He expressed similar ideas in a letter to “aunt” Aleksandra Tolstaia, written at about the same time as *A Confession*: he would much prefer his children to adhere to the faith of the Church than to reject all religious beliefs whatsoever [Tolstoi PSS 63: 6]. Only two years later, however, he wrote to aunt Tolstaia that the Orthodox, in his opinion, “belong to their father, the devil” (cf. John 8: 44) «Я вѣдь въ отношеніи православія – вашей вѣры, нахожусь не въ положеніи заблуждающагося или отклоняющагося, я нахожусь въ положеніи обличителя» [Толстой ПСС 63: 92] (“In relation to your religion, Orthodoxy, I am not a lost sheep or a deviant, but one who shall expose it”) [Tolstoi PSS 63: 92].

Researchers have largely ignored the affection/hate attitude that characterized Tolstoi's relation to Orthodoxy in *A Confession* – perhaps because Tolstoi himself moderated it rather quickly. He soon condemned Orthodoxy as «паразиты истинного христианства» (“a parasite on true Christianity”) [Tolstoi PSS 50: 103] and as «одна из самых суеверных и вредных ересей» (“one

of the most superstitious and harmful heresies that exist”) [Tolstoi PSS 50: 87]. But the idea of a duality in Orthodoxy lies as an unspoken premise between the lines of much of what Tolstoi later wrote and said. Sometimes it was also expressed more explicitly. On 4 January 1908, he had a conversation with Dmitrii Troitskii, an Orthodox priest. Without beating about the bush, Tolstoi referred to the teachings of the Church as “dung” that contaminated the spiritual. On the same occasion, however, he also claimed that

Да, у вас есть истина. Если бы у вас не было истины, вы бы давно погибли. Но вместе с истиной у вас и много лжи. Вас гордыня дьявольская обуяла, что вы знаете истину [Гусев 1973: 77].

(Yes, you have the truth. If you didn't, you would have succumbed long ago. But together with the truth you also have much lies. A satanic pride has made you believe that you know the truth) [Gusev 1973: 77].

Here, Tolstoi expresses the same understanding of the relationship between truth and lies in Orthodoxy as in *A Confession*. This view can be found even in his most viciously anti-Orthodox work, *An Examination of Dogmatic Theology*, to which I will now turn.

An Examination of Dogmatic Theology.

During the autumn of 1879, Tolstoi felt increasingly uneasy in his Orthodox faith. He had conversations with his friend Nikolai Strakhov and with Dmitrii Khomiakov, the son of the leading Slavophile Aleksei Khomiakov, and discussed with them his views on faith and the Church [Tolstoi PSS 62: 499]. Strakhov counselled him to seek out Orthodox experts on dogmatics, to get the doctrines of the Church presented from the most authoritative sources. Tolstoi followed this advice, and when he went to Moscow in September that year, he had talks with, among others, Metropolitan Makarii (Bulgakov, 1816–1882) the author of a two-volume compendium *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, which was required reading at all theological colleges in the country.

His talks with Makarii failed to lead to any clarification, but only six weeks later Tolstoi embarked on a thorough study not only of Metropolitan Makarii's books, but of all available textbooks in Orthodox systematic theology. The result of all this reading was his *Examination of the Dogmatic Theology* (hereafter: *Examination*), which he worked on throughout the

¹ Примечание: в круглых скобках дан перевод цитат из работ Л. Н. Толстого с русского языка на английский.

last months of 1879 and the first quarter of 1880. With its 236 pages, it is one of Tolstói's most voluminous religious treatises and the only one entirely focused on confrontation with Orthodox theology.

In the introduction, Tolstói explained that when he commenced his investigations, he was still an Orthodox believer. However, he had felt the need for a better understanding of this faith, as its teachings increasingly seemed to conflict with his own immediate perceptions of God and His law. As Tolstói presented it, it was not academic, scholarly interest that had driven him, but a deep, personal need to gain a firmer grounding. This he still hoped to find in the Church.

In a letter to Strakhov on 29 February 1880, Tolstói expressed his surprise at the results of his study of Orthodox dogmatics. «Если бы мнѣ рассказывали то, что я тамъ нашель, я бы не повѣрилъ» [Толстой ПСС 63: 13] (“If anyone had told me what I would find there, I would not have believed him”) [Tolstói PSS 63: 13]. And Tolstói's conclusions are indeed remarkable: «И я понял, наконец, что все это вероучение, то, в котором мне казалось тогда, что выражается вера народа, что все это не только ложь, но сложившийся веками обман людей неверующих, имеющий определенную и низменную цель» [Толстой ПСС 23: 63] (“I finally realized that this whole doctrine of faith, which I once supposed expressed the people's beliefs, is not just lies, but are the fraud of nonbelievers, accumulated over the centuries”) [Tolstói PSS 23: 63].

However, the indictments in *Examination* is interspersed with desperate cries for help. On several occasions, Tolstói apostrophizes the Orthodox theologians «Я ищу спасительной веры... Так преподайте мне эти богом откровенные истины» [Толстой ПСС 23: 65] (“I seek the saving faith ... Therefore, teach me the truths that God has revealed”) [Tolstói PSS 23: 65]. «Покажите мне тщету моих возражений, размягчите мое зачерствелое сердце» [Толстой ПСС 23: 67] (“Show me why my objections are groundless, and soften my callous heart”) [Tolstói PSS 23: 67]. Such outbursts might perhaps be simply rhetorical devices, but can also be taken as expressing a genuine desire for spiritual guidance.

A Confession had been concluded just before Tolstói embarked on his examination of Orthodox dogmatics. The two books are

closed linked. *Examination* is a necessary follow-up to *A Confession*; strictly speaking, they are two parts of the same work. The original version of *A Confession* from 1879 ends with the following words:

Что в учении есть истина, это мне несомненно; но несомненно и то, что в нем есть ложь, и я должен найти истину и ложь и отделить одно от другого. И вот я приступил к этому. Что я нашел в этом учении ложного, что я нашел истинного и к каким выводам я пришел, составляет следующие части сочинения, которое, если оно того стоит и нужно кому-нибудь, вероятно будет когда-нибудь и где-нибудь напечатано [Толстой ПСС 23: 57].

(I do not doubt that there is truth in the Orthodox teachings, and equally indubitably there are lies in it. I have to find the truth and the lie and separate them from each other. And this I have started with. What I have found of false and what I have found of truth in this doctrine, and which conclusions I have reached, will make up the next parts of this work. If it is worth it and if someone needs it, it will probably be printed somewhere sometime) [Tolstói PSS 23: 57].

The “next parts” are precisely *Examination*. Tolstói's secretary Nikolai Gusev, who had access to Tolstói's unpublished manuscripts, explains that in the original draft, the first lines of *Examination* follow immediately after the paragraph quoted above [Gusev 1963: 618]. In the first printed version, *A Confession* bore a subtitle: “Introduction to an unpublished work”¹.

Tolstói did a thorough job in his study of Orthodox dogmatics. In the introduction to *Examination*, he writes that he read

...все наши катехизисы – Филарета, Платона и др., прочел послание восточных патриархов, потом православное исповедание Петра Могилы, прочел изложение православной веры Иоанна Дамаскина и, наконец, свод всего этого – Введение в богословие Макария, потом самое Догматическое богословие того же Макария [Тол-

¹ Few researchers have commented upon this connection and others have misunderstood it. Inessa Medzhibovskaya [2008: 232] erroneously believes that *A Confession* was given this subtitle because Tolstói intended it to be an introduction to “the long narrative of confessed wrongdoings and sin”.

стой ПСС 23: 61]¹.

(...all our catechisms – Filaret’s, Platon’s and others. I read the *Epistle* of the Eastern Patriarchs, then Peter Mogila’s *Orthodox Creed* and John of Damascus’ account of the Orthodox faith. Finally, as a summary of all this, I read *Introduction to Theology* by Makarii and *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology* of the same Makarii) [Tolstoi PSS 23: 61].

He concentrated, however, on Makarii’s book, even if it, he claimed, was utterly devoid of any merit. In his view, it consisted of “sheer imagination”, “blasphemous fever fantasies”, “deliberate lies”, “pitiful and crooked distortions”, etc. Almost overwhelmed by disgust, Tolstoi had repeatedly felt tempted to interrupt his work on these «кощунственные речи о боре» (“blasphemous literature”) [Tolstoi PSS 23: 80 & passim]. Against this background, it is remarkable to find that there are some important coincidences between Tolstoi’s own ideas and the ones he found expressed in the Orthodox dogmatic literature. Below, I will point to two, his anthropology, and his view on how we can understand God.

Theology of Man.

Protestant anthropology often takes as its starting point the dual distance between God and man: What is created is different from the Creator, and after the fall of Man, mankind has been removed even further from its origin. Sin has become an inseparable part of human nature as Original sin. Sin is not just something we have, but something we *are*.

By contrast, classical Orthodox theology strongly emphasizes the *similarity* between

God and humans. In Genesis 1:26 we can read: “Then God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness”. Here, man’s Godlikeness is linked to the act of creation. It has been laid down in human nature from the very beginning, and even though the “image” was soiled by the Fall, it has not been crushed.

Although Genesis uses two parallel words – image and likeness – these do not in Hebrew express a double meaning, but are to be understood as reinforcing synonyms. However, in the standard Orthodox understanding, each of these two words expresses one particular aspect of man’s divinity. The specific details of this doctrine vary somewhat from theologian to theologian, but there is relatively broad consensus that image (*obraz*) refers to the formal aspect – generally: reason – and likeness or similitude (*podobie*) to the real aspect – virtue or holiness.

Metropolitan Makarii summarizes the Orthodox *obraz-podobie* model as follows:

Быть по образу Божию свойственно намъ по первому нашему сотворенію; но сдѣлаться по подобію Божию зависитъ отъ нашей воли. И это зависящее отъ нашей воли существуетъ въ насъ в насъ только въ возможности; пріобрѣтается же нами на самом дѣлѣ посредствомъ нашей дѣятельности [Макарий (Булгаков) 1895, I: 457].

(To be God’s *obraz* is characteristic of us in the way we are originally created, but to become God’s *podobie* depends on our will. It exists in us only as an opportunity; while we actually acquire it through our behavior [Makarii (Bulgakov) 1895, I: 457].

Tolstoi occasionally employed *obraz-podobie* thinking in his writings. For example, in his diary for 1894 he expressed the idea that reason is «данный от Бога и подобный Ему» (given by God and is like Him (*podobnyi*)) [Tolstoi PSS 52: 155-56]. In 1900, he claimed that it would be insane hubris and a sin to claim that we are like Jupiter or the militant Lord of Sabaoth. On the other hand, to be like the God we know through love and reason is a necessary condition for achieving peace and joy. «Чтобы быть подобнымъ Богу надо только любить» (In order to be God *podobnyi*, it is enough to love) [Tolstoi PSS 54: 39]. In *The Way of Life*, Tolstoi similarly taught that to live “godly” (*po-bozhii*) is to be like God (*podobnyi*). More important than these individual quotes, however, is the fact that Tolstoi’s general scheme of salvation shows

¹ Filaret’s (Drozdov, 1782–1867) book *Extended Christian Catechism for the Orthodox Church* was published numerous times between 1827 and 1909. According to George Maloney, many Orthodox regarded it as one of the symbolic books of the church [Maloney 1976: 52]. It replaced all earlier Russian catechisms and remained in use at least until the 1970s [Haupmann 1971: 66]. Metropolitan Platon’s (Levshin, 1737–1812) *Orthodox Theology in brief* from 1775 was the first attempt to ‘create a theological system written in Russian’ [Florovskii 1982: 111] since Platon’s predecessor as Metropolitan of Kyiv, Peter Mogila (Mohyla), had written his *Confessio fidei* (1640) in Latin. In the 17th century the theological environment in Kyiv was strongly influenced by Western theological traditions, since most of Ukraine at the time was part of the Polish Commonwealth. *Confessio fidei* was nevertheless accepted at the church council in Jassy (Iasi) in 1642 as a correct presentation of the Orthodox faith.

clear structural conformity to the teaching of Orthodox school theology on this point. Tolstoi strongly emphasized the divine nature of man. He perceived the relationship between God and man as a whole – part relationship.

Tolstoi's conception of salvation was distinctly dynamic. Therefore, when he claimed that we are "part" of God, that should be taken as an invitation to "participate" in God (*participere, u-chast-vovat'* [Gustafson 1986: 335]). Tolstoi always understood the divine nature of man under two parallel viewpoints: as an "already now", and as a "not yet". Man is divine, insofar as he realizes it, but he must also earn his divinity through his way of living.

«Христианство говорит: живи сообразно твоей природе (подразумевая божественную природу)» [Толстой ПСС 28: 85].

("Christianity says: Live in accordance with your nature (and by that is meant: Your divine nature)") [Tolstoi PSS 28: 85].

Also on another level, we find coincidence between Tolstoi's and the Eastern Churches' understanding of human nature: in their view on the relationship between soul and body. Richard Gustafson claims that "in Eastern Christian anthropology, there is little of the tendency towards a simple dualism between body and soul or mind that is so characteristic of Western modes of thinking even before Descartes" [Gustafson 1986: 267]. Instead, Gustafson maintains, the Eastern Churches operate with a three-part image of human nature in accordance with 1 Thessalonians 5: 23 – spirit, soul, and body. He sees a clear parallel with Tolstoi's view, ascribing a similar trichotomic anthropology also to him.

However, if Tolstoi had adhered to a trichotomic anthropology, that would set him apart from the dominant trend in Eastern Church theology. Admittedly, the three-part formula had many supporters in the early Greek Church; and also more recent Orthodox theologians have advocated this model [e.g. Ware 1981: 60-61]. In the Middle Ages and until the end of the 19th century, however, Orthodox anthropology was clearly and unambiguously dichotomist. In our context, it is particularly important to recognize that all the Orthodox sources Tolstoi read adhered strictly to this view [Filaret Drozdov [1880] 1978: 31; Platon Levshin [1775] 1969: 45-48]. Makarii devoted a whole section of his *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology* to "the composition of the human being".

Makarii admitted that the New Testament contains a few statements where the spirit is clearly separated from the soul, but these must be interpreted in light of the dichotomic statements of the Bible, since the word of God cannot contradict itself.

Въ каждомъ изъ насъ нынѣ не одинъ, а два челоѡка – внутренній и внѣшній, духовный и плотскій. Будем же заботиться о томъ, «чтобы отложить намъ, по первому житію, прежний образ жизни ветхого челоѡка, тлѣщаго въ похотяхъ прелестныхъ по первому житію, и облещися въ новаго челоѡка, созданнаго по Богу въ правдѣ въ препободовіи истины» [Макарий (Булгаков) 1895, I: 91, quoting Eph. 4: 22-24].

(In each of us there are not one, but two persons, an inner and an outer, a spiritual and a carnal. We shall therefore follow the precept "That ye put off ... the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness") [Makarii (Bulgakov) 1895, I: 91, quoting Eph. 4: 22-24].

This quote it is strikingly similar to Tolstoi's view as he formulated it in *What I Believe*:

«Та борьба между стремлением к жизни животной и жизни разумной, которая лежит в душе каждого челоѡка ... составляет сущность жизни каждого» [Толстой ПСС 23: 376].

(The battle between what draws us towards the animal life and what draws us toward the reasonable life ... is embodied in every person's soul and constitutes the essence of the individual's life) [Tolstoi PSS 23: 376].

An essential characteristic of human existence, according to Tolstoi, is that we live at the intersection between two words – the spiritual and the material. As seen from the outside, man is an animal, subject to the laws of nature, but this is literally speaking a "superficial" description. Man has also an inside, which is divine:

Существование в челоѡке животного, только животного, не есть жизнь челоѡческая. Жизнь по одной воле бога тоже не есть жизнь челоѡческая. Жизнь челоѡческая есть составная из жизни животной и жизни божеской [Толстой ПСС 28: 79].

("The animal and purely animal existence in man is not the human life. Neither is life according to the will of God the human life.

The human life is composed of the animal and the divine life”) [Tolstoi PSS 28: 79].

Normatively, according to Tolstoi, human life consists in a movement toward the divine life: «чем более приближается эта составная к жизни божеской, тем больше жизни» (same place). Or expressed figuratively: «[христианское учение] говорит человеку, что он ни зверь, ни ангел, но ангел, рождающийся из зверя, – духовное существо, рождающееся из животного. Что все наше пребывание в этом мире есть не что иное, как это рождение» ([the Christian teaching] says that man is neither a wild animal nor an angel, but it is an angel which is being born from a wild animal, a spiritual entity born out of an animal entity. This is what our entire existence in this world consists of) [Tolstoi PSS 39: 123]. The similarities between the anthropology of Tolstoi and the Eastern Churches, then, must be based on shared dualistic beliefs, not trichotomic ones.

God's incomprehensibility.

Makarii is a distinctly theocentric thinker: whatever subject he examines, he starts from God, and the first 350 pages of his dogmatics are exclusively devoted to God “an sich” (*in seipso*). He begins by discussing which possibilities we humans have to know anything about God at all, and declares that God is unfathomable. God is unlimited, while the human spirit is limited – and the infinite would no longer be infinite if it could be fully understood by a finite being [Makarii (Bulgakov) 1895, I: 69].

With this introduction, it might seem that Makarii's attempt to develop a positive theology about God would have stranded before it could get off the ground: after all, it is not much one can say about a completely incomprehensible God. However, for Makarii, God's incomprehensibility is not absolute: God has revealed Himself to mankind, through His creation and by supernatural revelations. «Первый догматъ, какой [Церковь] хочет внушить намъ, состоитъ в слѣдующемъ: “Богъ непостижимъ для человеческого разума; люди могутъ познавать Его лишь отчасти”» (The first dogma that [the Orthodox Church] will impress on us is the following: God is incomprehensible to human reason, humans can only have partial knowledge of Him) [Makarii (Bulgakov) 1895 I: 66]. To this, Tolstoi retorts: “If the author

[Makarii] had understood incomprehensibility as incomprehensibility, he would not have tried to prove that we can comprehend God ‘partially’ but would have acknowledged straightaway that we cannot comprehend Him” [Tolstoi PSS 23: 70].

For Makarii, the little word “partial” functions as a launching pad to the substantial part of his dogmatics. Having first expressed the minor caveat that the Orthodox Church “does not intend to define God”, Makarii goes on to list some of the most important qualities we can attribute to God: He is чистый духъ, вѣчный, всеблагій, всевѣдущій, всеправедный, всемогущій, вездѣсущій, неизмѣняемый, вседовольный, всеблаженный and so on (He is infinite, autarchic, autonomous, omnipresent, eternal, immutable, omnipotent, all-knowing, all-powerful, perfect freedom, perfect holiness, goodness, truthfulness, faithfulness, and righteousness) [Makarii (Bulgakov) 1895: 94-150]. Tolstoi's standard objection to each of these is that Makarii's definitions are illegitimate because they fail to take the incomprehensibility of God seriously [Tolstoi PSS 23: 72, 73 & 85 & 92 & 97 & 99].

The idea of God's incomprehensibility is a central and fundamental idea in all varieties of the Orthodox doctrine of faith, ancient and modern. It goes back to the Old Testament prohibition against making graven images or likenesses of God and is found in all Christian denominations. Luther, for instance, spoke of “the hidden God” (*Deus absconditus*), and warned his followers against trying to penetrate the obscure sides of God. To search behind the revelation to elicit from God His secrets is *lèse-majesté*. In the Eastern Churches, on the other hand, this is a mystery to dwell upon, and an entire theological tradition has developed around the concept of incomprehensibility: “apophatic” or “negative” theology. This theology has been associated in particular with *Corpus Areopagiticum*, a collection of writings attributed to the Greek Councillor Dionysius (who, according to Acts 17: 34, was converted by Saint Paul at the Areopagos), but it probably originated from a 6th-century Syrian monastic environment.

One of the Areopagitic writings, *About Mystical Theology*, distinguishes between two fundamentally different ways of approaching knowledge about God – the cataphatic and the apophatic. According to the cataphatic method,

men attempt to determine the being of God by attributing to Him qualities such as good, omnipotent, omniscient, etc. The reason why such positive descriptions of God are possible is that He has revealed Himself to mankind in successive theophanies, of which the Incarnation of Christ is the highest.

A higher form of theology is the apophatic. That it is “higher” does not mean that it gives more precise knowledge of God – indeed, it does not offer any precise, positive knowledge whatsoever. The apophatic theologian approaches God through negatives, expressing only what God is *not*. Like the sculptor who chips away everything superfluous from a block of stone in order to bring out the subject’s characteristic features in a statue, the apophatic mystic removes all definitions and ideas about God that have accumulated around Him. However, also the analogy with the sculptor does not hold: because God is so infinitely more difficult to “portray”, the negative theologian must act far more radically than the artist.

The apophatic path starts “from below”, from the material, by reminding us that God does not have body, form or shape. Accordingly, He is not subject to human change or passions. But God is not soul or intellect either. He is neither big nor small, neither time nor eternity, neither truth nor falsehood. Pseudo-Dionysius explains that all affirmative statements employ distinctions or contrasts; they assume that there is something to be compared *with* God, however, transcends all distinctions. Even the predicate “being” is too narrow to be used about Him [Dionysios 1968: 186-187].

If all affirmative statements turn out to be insufficient, then the negative ones also come to grief. God is not light – but He is also not not-light. To God, not just words, but even thought must be silent. He appears not only as the Invisible, but as the Unimaginable. For pseudo-Dionysius, God’s incomprehensibility is rooted in God himself and not merely the result of man’s limited capacity of understanding, in the way Makarii presented it [see Lossky 1973: 31].

Cataphasis and apophasis are opposite but not mutually exclusive methods. The former is made possible by God’s immanence, whereas the latter guards His transcendence. Cataphasis ends up by conferring on God a plurality of epithets, a “polionymity”. The

apophatic method leads to the contrary claim about God’s absolute “anonymity”, but these are two expressions of the same matter. They are both helpless attempts at grasping what is incomprehensible.

The negations lead into “the darkness of ignorance”, but that does not mean that they end up in emptiness, an absence. On the contrary, they lead the believer toward a Presence, a meeting with the living God. Apophasis is not abstract speculation, but a form of cleansing whereby the believer is emptied of all concepts, to be filled by Him. The goal is not *knowledge* of God, but *union* with Him.

Incomprehensibility is a central element in Tolstoi’s understanding of God. In his diaries, he constantly returned to this theme. In 1904, he described God as analogous to the mathematical sign “x”: He is the unknown entity, but without Him we would not be able to set up the equation of life, much less solve it [Tolstoi PSS 55: 98]. That same year, Tolstoi described God as

...этотъ Богъ для меня вѣчно Deus absconditus, непознаваемый. Я сознаю нѣчто внѣвременное, непространственное, внѣпричинное, но я никакого права не имѣю называть это Богомъ, т. е. въ этой невещественности, внѣвременнос[ти], непространственности, внѣпричинности видѣть Бога и Его сущность. ... Это есть только та высшая сущность, къ к[оторой] я причастенъ. Онъ мнѣ неизвѣстенъ, но мое назначеніе въ немъ нетолько извѣстно мнѣ, но моя причастность Ему составляетъ непоколебимую основу моей жизни [Толстой ПСС 55: 51].

...eternal *Deus absconditus*, incomprehensible. ... He is unknown to me, but I know that my destination is in him, and also that my participation in him constitutes the unshakable foundation of my life [Tolstoi PSS 55: 51].

Tolstoy returned to the concept of *Deus absconditus* in his diary in 1906, where God is also referred to as «непостижимаго, таинственнаго начала – Бога (Deus absconditus)» (the incomprehensible, mysterious principle (*nachalo*) [Tolstoi PSS 55: 226].

Polemicalizing against dogmatic Christian theology, Tolstoi wrote in his diary on 27 September 1894:

Чемъ серьезнее, искреннее я думаю о себе, о жизни и о начале ее, темъ меньше

мне нужен, тем нарушительнее становится понятие Бога. Чем ближе подходишь к Богу, тем меньше видишь Его. Не от того, что Его нет, а от того, что страшнее говорить о Нем, не то что определять, но называть Его [Толстой ПСС 52: 144].

(The more seriously and sincerely I think about myself, about life and its origin, the less need I have for a concept of God, the more devastating it becomes. The closer I get to God, the less I see Him. Not because He does not exist, but because it becomes more frightening to talk about Him, and even more so to define Him, mention Him) [Tolstoi PSS 52: 144].

Here, God's *existence* and the *concept* of Him (the attempt to seize Him) are seen as opposites. The more one strives towards the latter, the less will one experience the former.

In the short pamphlet *Thoughts on God*, a collection of excerpts from Tolstoi's diaries composed by his close collaborator Vladimir Chertkov, Tolstoi provided an important description of his understanding of the apophatic way:

Приблизиться мнѣ къ Нему можно и хочется, и въ этомъ моя жизнь, но приближеніе нисколько не увеличиваетъ и не можегъ увеличить моего знанія. Всякая попытка воображенія о томъ, что я познаю Его (напримѣръ, что Онъ творецъ, или милосердъ, или что-нибудь подобное), удаляетъ меня отъ Него и прекращаетъ мое приближеніе къ Нему [Толстой 1912/13, XV: 59].

(My life consists in approaching Him, but this movement in no way increases my knowledge about Him. ... Any attempt to form an imagination of Him (e.g., that He is Creator or merciful), removes me from Him) [Tolstoi 1912/13, XV: 59].

Tolstoi had the same experience as that underlying the apophaticism of the Areopagite. Importantly, this was not just a matter of a common psychological experience, but an insight communicated to him through Church tradition. Tolstoi had direct knowledge about the negative theology of the Eastern Church, and accused Metropolitan Makarii of having distorted the «глубоких, искренних речей апостолов и отцов церкви, доказывающих непостижимость Божию» (distorted the deep and sincere speech of the apostles and Church fathers who prove that God is incomprehensible) [Tolstoi PSS 23: 71]. Drawing on this tradition, he could attack Makarii for not

being *sufficiently Orthodox*.

Makarii's *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology* is the most important link between Tolstoi and the thinking of the Church Fathers. In this work, the bishop refers to a large number of theologians who professed apophatic views – Gregory of Nyssa, Basil the Great, Efreim the Syrian, John Chrysostom, Simeon the New Theologian, and others [see Makarii (Bulgakov) 1895, I, 69-70]. In most cases, Makarii also provides accurate references to accessible Russian translations that Tolstoi could check. Thus, Makarii was the central supplier of the arsenal of arguments Tolstoi used against him.

In Tolstoi's published texts, his thoughts on God often acquired a polemical sting aimed at Orthodoxy and the Christian concept of God. In the diaries, however, he was primarily concerned with clarifying his own, personal relationship with God: maintaining a strict demarcation line against Orthodoxy was a less pressing concern. In one diary note, Tolstoi argued that

«он не понятие, а существо, то, что православные называютъ живой Богъ в противуположность Богу пантеистическо[му]» [Толстой ПСС 53: 118].

(God is not a concept, but a being, what the Orthodox call “the living God” as opposed to a pantheistic God) [Tolstoi PSS 53: 118].

Here, he explicitly drew a positive comparison between his own understanding of God and that of the Orthodox. This statement might perhaps be expected to have interested many Orthodox believers, but comments on it have been surprisingly few.

Conclusion.

For a long time, scholars rather uncritically assumed that Tolstoi was influenced by those whom he himself mentioned as his most important inspirations, and no one else. The closer we get to Tolstoi's own time, the stronger does this tendency become. A clear example of this approach is the German scholar Felix Haase. In his study of the *Quellen der Weltanschauung L. N. Tolstojs* from 1928, he magnanimously concluded that Tolstoi “received impulses and essential contributions to his worldview from all ages and peoples” [Haase 1928: 199]. Haase mentioned virtually every possible source – with the conspicuous exception of Orthodoxy.

Under the influence of semiotics, however, there has come a growing understanding of

the interplay between text and context, between ruptures and continuity in the history of ideas. Today, we no longer regard it as highly likely that a thinker can be significantly influenced by *all* national cultures and *all* epochs. The culture one has grown up in and which forms the framework of primary socialization in important respects enjoys cognitive primacy, also for those who rebel against it.

Although Tolstoi lived in a society where Russian Orthodoxy was the state religion, we cannot without further investigation assume that he was immersed in its theology and beliefs. Many Russians of that time (especially among the upper classes) had no more frequent contact with the Church than what is common in many Western societies today: One is baptized in it, then confirmed, married, and finally buried there. Although their worldview and values in essential respects may be significantly informed by this Christian cultural background, this is not something that most people think about on a daily basis.

For Tolstoi it was different. He had grown up in a home where almost all his primary persons and educators were Orthodox believers who took their faith seriously. Tolstoi's autobiographical novel *Childhood* also documents that he early on came in contact with fiery representatives of popular Russian piety, holy wanderers and "holy fools". In all likelihood, Tolstoi was almost irreligious for a period in his youth, especially during his stay at Kazan' University and in the years immediately thereafter, but when he joined a military unit in the North Caucasus in 1851, religion made a remarkable comeback in his life [Schmid 2010: 70]. A spiritual crisis towards the end of the 1870s led him to return temporarily to the Orthodox faith of his forebears, but his religious pondering soon brought him beyond the limits of the Orthodox faith he was raised in.

Also after 1880, Tolstoi's intellectual biography must be characterized as a story of restless wandering, but in some respects it was like walking in circles. In his novels and stories, publicist writings, letters and diaries, he constantly returned to the same topics and mulled over the same paradoxes. Sometimes he contradicted himself egregiously: indeed, attempts to reconstruct Tolstoianism as a well-rounded, consistent system of thought must be dismissed as unsuccessful. Nevertheless, we can observe that Tolstoi from around 1882 to his death firmly adhered to certain

crucial principles. This makes it possible to identify some key clusters of motifs that form a kind of mainstay in his thought structure.

Most of Tolstoi's main religious ideas were taken from the Christian heritage, but his selection of and creative elaboration on them show that his life's work did not consist in rediscovering Christ's unadulterated doctrine as it had been before the Church perverted it, such as Tolstoi himself claimed. Instead, it was basically a reinterpretation and alteration of the Christian faith that he had encountered in his own life.

Central evidence for this claim I find in Tolstoi's voluminous, combative text against Orthodox school theology, *Examination of Dogmatic Theology*. In this massive tome, in which Tolstoi the stylist is conspicuously absent, the polemic is so coarse and overplayed that few readers have managed to get through more than a few chapters before giving up. But even if we cannot learn much about Orthodox theology by reading this work, we can gain important information about Tolstoi's own theology by reading *Examination* "against the grain", as it were.

A particularly significant influence from Tolstoi's reading of Orthodox literature can be traced in his *theology* in a narrow sense, i.e., in his doctrine about God. Of fundamental importance to any Orthodox understanding of God is the duality between apophatic (negative) and cataphatic (positive) theology. Using these two complementary approaches, Orthodox Christians believe that it is possible to maintain at the same time that God is completely inaccessible *and* fundamentally accessible to humans. This is very similar to Tolstoi's own understanding of God as, on the one hand, utterly unfathomable, and on the other, the fountainhead of love and the giver of meaning in life.

But even though Tolstoi's teaching exhibits clear affinities with mainstream Orthodox theology, he reorganized these common elements to such an extent that the end result was distinctly Tolstoian. Orthodox theology is strictly theocentric and understands man in light of God the Creator, while Tolstoi explicitly went in the opposite direction. For him, man is the given entity (which he knew primarily by means of introspection), whereas God is the unknown *x* which must be postulated in order to solve the calculation of human life (= give life meaning). This makes Tolstoianism a sort of "upside-down" or "inside-out" Orthodoxy.

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