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THE ROLE OF THE RELIGIOUS DOUBT IN THE WORKS OF L. N. TOLSTOY AND M. DE UNAMUNO

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Summary

Leo N. Tolstoy (1828-1910) from Russia and Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936) from Spain, both giants of the world literature were also very complex philosophers and social activists. They were separated in space and time of more than thirty years but had similar views of the renewed Christianity based on the daily readings of the Gospels. I explore the role of religious doubt in their writings which, according to both writers, stimulates faith in God and in the long term brings internal peace. Such religious thinking challenged the accepted concepts of faith and met with the excommunication of Tolstoy by Russian Orthodox Church.

Key Words: L. N. Tolstoy, Miguel de Unamuno, Russian Orthodox Church, Roman Catholic Church in Spain, religious doubt, concept of faith.

Introduction

Kofi Atta Annan, a diplomat from Ghana, who served as the seventh Secretary-General of the United Nations, from 1 January 1997 to 31 December 2006 stated that '*the challenges these days are even more daunting than they were at the peak of the cold war. Not only do we continue to face grave nuclear threats, but those threats are being compounded by the new weapons developments, new violence within States and new challenges to the rule of law.*' (UN speech, 25 March 2005)

21st Century has created many challenges, fears and political upheavals so far.

There has been fast progress in technology, climate change, economic problems that created

job insecurities and as a consequence, increased level of stress that creates frustration and a feeling of helplessness in people. Covid-19 crisis produced 'new normal' (work from home) and chaos.

Many turn to councillors for help with their psychological problems and fears. Yet, chaos in the current world is not a new phenomenon. Each century has a fair amount of its own challenges but equally great personalities who with their actions/writings set the examples of compassion and peace; these continue to inspire those who believe that the best leadership comes from people who believe and practice non-violence by use of the non-violent strategies.

In the times when achieving both world and personal peace seems like an impossible task, the simple yet universal wisdom of achieving peace of two giants of the world's literature, L.N. Tolstoy and Miguel de Unamuno resonates today as clearly as in their lifetime.

Miguel de Unamuno, a Spanish writer of "Generation of 98" owed a great deal more to the Russian novelist, L. N. Tolstoy than mere inspiration for the title of *Peace in War*. In a letter to his friend, Federico Urales he states: "Tolstoy has been one of the souls that profoundly stirred my own; his works have left a deep impression on me" (Unamuno, 1966-72, vol 5). Which works he refers to, is unclear. Yet, both writers are deeply religious in their highly individualistic ways. Both believe that without doubt or desperation, faith remains dogma. Both, in the existential fashion, are searching for the meaning of their lives. Science ignores the existential yearnings of man. Reason is the obstacle to faith. To create what we cannot see, to desire God's existence and to act with love towards one another is the essence of the philosophical thinking for them. Tolstoy became a celebrity, someone—in Daniel Boorstin's words—well known for being well known (The Image, 1992) He was a man full of contradictions: a mystic and a rationalist; a Count who lived lavishly in his family estate of Yasnaya Polyana and a man who wanted to give away everything he possessed to the Russian poor people; the enemy of the Russian State and Russian Orthodox Church. A man of uncontested genius who went through the religious crisis at the age of 50. After writing *Anna Karenina* in 1878 he published *Confession* which (that reveals many details of his life) and all his writings became religious in nature. He was a man full of paradoxes as he became vegetarian at the age of 50, gave up all the luxuries of the physical world, wore peasant's tunic and preached his five commandments to his people. He built a school for peasant children where he taught them himself. He was a literary genius but a mediocre theologian. Yet, he also became a celebrity and was more of a tsar than the Tsar himself. He preached peace and non-violence wherever he went. He donated royalties from his books to a religious group of Dukhobors (believers in non-violence) so they could go to Canada to avoid the military service in Russia.

In our time, Tolstoy stands out above the titans of the 19th Century. In his time, he became famous in his country, not only among the intellectuals, but also among peasants and 'common' people. Abroad, Tolstoy enjoyed great popularity not only for his artistic works, but also in his battle for religious liberty in his country, for his criticism of the Orthodox Church, the government, pedagogy, and culture.

Tolstoy's understanding of religion

This critique had a firm base in the understanding that Tolstoy had of religion and in the creation of his own moral system. In order to understand the religious ideas of Tolstoy which underline this moral, it is not sufficient to analyse his religious thinking; they must also be supported by the analysis of his actions. The way Tolstoy lived and acted throughout his later life makes people realise that he did not only seek "his truth" and "his peace", but he tried to put into practise his own understanding of the Gospel.

Tolstoy was brought up in the Russian Orthodox faith but in his youth he distanced himself from it. After his religious crisis, the definite rupture occurred for two reasons; the Orthodox Church denied the “correct” understanding of the faith of other Christian religions. For Tolstoy, what mattered was man and love to his neighbour. The second reason lies in the position of the Church regarding war. “How could the Russians kill their enemies in war in the name of the faith which the Church professed?” asks Tolstoy without any response.

Tolstoy rejects the Church’s approval of killing enemies during war. This rejection of the Church as an institution probably has deeper roots. The search for the truth, the passionate temperament of Tolstoy no longer needed external rules for his own spiritual wellbeing. For Tolstoy, religion does not reside in the preparation of man for a future life, but should be strength for the present life.

Tolstoy understood that “the truth” is found in tradition, in the Gospels. His profession of faith was much simpler than that of the Church. All the teaching of the Church seemed superficial to him. He could, however, accept the superficial, despite being incomprehensible to him if the spiritual world that the Church offered did not oppose true love towards neighbours. Religion does not reside in intellect; faith is not the acceptance of a system of historic events which can be demonstrated with our reason or experience. For Tolstoy, religion and faith are not so separated from intellectual life; faith, live, understanding of the world, and performance in this world should all form an interior unity in man.

For four years (1879-1883) Tolstoy dedicated himself to the enormous work of translating thousands of pages of the Greek Gospels to Russian with notes and critical commentaries of the Russian theologians in order to demonstrate that his translation was more correct and detailed than other translations. The usefulness of this enormous work was contained within itself. Tolstoy soon realised that it was not valuable to either intellectuals or to the simple people. Furthermore, such a detailed translation of the Gospels, which would change the meaning of the other interpretations, was not permitted in Russia at that time. When he became aware of the difficulties, Tolstoy wrote *The Gospel in Brief* and *My faith*, the works which contain the very interpretation of the Gospels made by the writer. This was what led him to the elaboration of his own commandments, logics according to him, which were based entirely on the teaching of Christ in the New Testament.

Tolstoy observed that Christ himself never wrote any book and that he never addressed the educated people. Only after his death did anyone begin to write what was known of him. The four Gospels are the work of thousands of human minds. The Churches added false interpretations, and distorted and contradictory explanations. For Tolstoy, the essence of Christianity resides in the total fulfilment of five fundamental ideas taken from the New Testament.

1. Do not get angry
2. Do not resist evil
3. Do not commit adultery
4. Do not swear
5. Love your enemies

The fifth commandment which Tolstoy considers essential to ensure the kingdom of God is fulfilled in this world is to love the neighbours.

It is in this spirit that Tolstoy corrects the interpretation of the Gospels. By doing so, he reduces 613 commandments from the Mosaic Law to the low sum of five. After translating the key words literally, Tolstoy interprets these five commandments according to his own logic, and y considers them to be moral rules for each man.

A year before his death, Tolstoy, distressed, asks himself again if that God who he writes and

talks so much about really exists. He states that if one believes in the existence of God, God exists. Yet the words of Christ, “love God and your neighbour” seem superfluous to him. To him, loving God seems incompatible with loving your neighbour because loving your neighbour is clear, but loving God is the complete opposite. One may accept that this God exists inside himself, but how can he be loved? Here, his knowledge of the Gospels helps him. God is love. We know him because we love him, but the belief in which God himself exists is a rationalisation, very often superfluous and damaging. If someone had asked him if God existed inside himself, Tolstoy would say that yes, he did exist, but that did not understand anything about this God. But it is not like this with the God of love. Tolstoy affirms that he certainly knows him. He constitutes the explanation of life for the author (*On Life*, 1904).

Tolstoy affirms that the teaching of Christ is the wellbeing and the truth. Jesus Christ teaches him that love among humans is a natural condition: children are born into it according to the words of Christ, and in it they all live in it until this condition is submitted to an error or to temptation. The commandments of Christ gave the writer the means to salvation against the temptation which removed his spiritual wellbeing. Tolstoy says that he understood that, through the fulfilment of the commandments, Christ showed him the danger of temptation which leads to the ruin of a human being.

Tolstoy continues to elaborate on the five commandments because he is convinced that in them one may find his own meaning for life, a rational meaning. He adds that, in the past, he was overwhelmed to think about suffering, and that death shocked him, but that now he desires them. He remembers that Christ said that the truth would make all men free, and Tolstoy himself already felt free. If the Russian society were a society of true Christians, they would not harm anyone, not Germans, or Turks; no-one would kill anyone else. If true Christians live in a non-Christian society which defends itself by war, and requires that Christians take part in a war, there is then the possibility that the Christians could help others to see the truth.

All revolutions tend to divide the masses through violence. Only the action of truth brings light to man’s conscience. From the moment in which Christ pronounced these commandments to humanity until the work for the wellbeing of humanity finishes, there will be no end. The Church formed by those who wished to unite all human beings is already dead, but the Church which hears the words of Christ exists, and its members know that life is a blessing and that the commandments of Christ must be fulfilled.

He often affirms that there are hundreds of religions in the world, and thousands of superstitions; all have the same basis despite having different forms and expressions (*On Life*, 1988). All these religions relate to the conscience of these truths. The religions have different exterior forms but they have the same essence; the power of God through love makes us strong.

Some years later he amplified this affirmation, explaining that he didn’t want to be a Christian, and that he didn’t want people to be Buddhist, Confucian, Taoist, or Muslim. According to the writer, we all have to find our own faith, common to us all, renounce ourselves, and dedicate ourselves fully to the community by spreading words of peace (*On Life*, 1904).

When Tolstoy at 82 years of age abandoned Yasnaya Polyana – property which he had renounced several years before – and died in the train station of Astapovo, some commented that Tolstoy fled towards immorality. Despite the comment seeming grotesque, it could be interpreted as the final sign of fulfilling the laws of the Gospels. By his love for the truth of the Gospels, Tolstoy abandons his home and family to continue his spiritual life.

His internal journey was slow and forged with pains and yearnings, just as with Unamuno. The conflict between the longing to believe and reason, which is formulated in distressing questions

which lead Tolstoy to a deep spiritual crisis. The Gospels as a spiritual guide for this life, and a breath of hope for the next, is a constant in for Unamuno's as well. Tolstoy's affirmation that "if man is alive, he believes in something, If he doesn't believe in anything, he lives for nothing, and is already dead...without faith one cannot live" is the essential idea which Unamuno also employs, in one form or another, in his religious essays."

M de Unamuno's understanding of religion

The topic of "religious truth", understood in terms of the intensity of the search for true life values, concerns, and religious worries, and not dogmas – the truths affirmed by the Church – make up the body of Unamuno's religious evolution. In 1896 after his son's death, Unamuno like Tolstoy, experiences religious crisis and depression.

He shares his fears in the letter to his friend Jiménez Ilundain on the 3rd January 1898:

How terrible it is to cross the steppe of intellectualism and to one day find oneself, by means of a call and sight of warning, confronted by the image of death and of total ending. If only you knew about my distressing nights and my days of lost spiritual appetite...The crisis violently and suddenly took hold of me...and I understood the quiet life when, seeing me crying, my wife came to me and cried out: "My child". Then she called me child, child. I sought refuge in the practices which the days of my infancy evoked (Unamuno, 1966- 72, vol 1).

After Unamuno's religious crisis, the quest for meaning of life and internal peace dominate all his writings. His status in Spain was not that as of celebrity as it was Tolstoy but that of a deep thinker and intellectual.

Unamuno confessed in his essay *Nicodemo Fariseo* that the illness that many experience is called intellectualism and it can only be cured by returning to the "milk of infancy". This essay seems to be not only proof of Unamuno's crisis but also his public confession of the same. Nicodemus' confession relates to the events of Unamuno's crisis, who also lives an external life, and takes advantage of the ideas of the night of his crisis which will form the basis of his religious thinking for the rest of his life. According to Unamuno's confession, the objective of life should be man's decision to flee from the superficial, from the external, and submerge himself in the interior, in the intimate, despite being full of torture and of fight. That is to say, a living faith, peace and salvation. "You are the master of your desires and of your intentions; you are not this through rigour, nor through your doing, nor through your actions" (Unamuno 1966- 72, vol 2).

In *Tragic Sense of Life*, Unamuno speaks once again about his experience of God as a basis for his belief: "God himself, no longer the idea of God, can become a immediately felt reality; and although we may not explain ourselves with his idea, or the existence or essence of the Universe, we have the direct feeling of God, above all in times of spiritual suffocation" (Unamuno, 1966- 72, vol 3).

Unamuno, just as Pascal and Tolstoy, is persuaded, but not convinced, of the existence of God because he had no rational proof. Therefore, he tends to believe through his emotions and his feelings.

On many occasions, Unamuno feels this spiritual distress; his intellectual scepticism makes him doubt and, consequently, the fight to overcome reason keeps his faith up in the air. His rational side wants to have concrete proof of the existence of God, and proof of life after death, but Unamuno admits that it is this lack of evidence that constitutes the source of his hope. Paradoxically, as Unamuno says, only those who doubt may hope for true belief.

The Gospels were the daily reading of Unamuno during his entire life, he knew them by memory. He gave them a personal interpretation, because he thought that their interpretation helped people to resolve the issue of their own peace and salvation. Unamuno indicates that the general doctrines of the Church are of no use in reaching a personal individual experience.

On the other hand, knowing something of the agonic personality of Unamuno, one may say that, for him, the experience of interpreting the Gospels was probably the result of a constant contradiction and agony, a fight to reconcile themes from the Bible with his own creative belief. In spite of his tormented doubts, it seems that, for Unamuno, the interpretation of the Gospels constitutes a familiar and rational route by which he could draw close to God. Unamuno interprets the teaching of Christ in the Gospels according to his own understanding, not according to the Church's interpretation. Unamuno comments on the teaching of Christ about the power of love, the place of women, the urging doubt not only of the believer but of Jesus himself, and the sacraments required by the Church. On interpreting the Gospels, Unamuno creates his own system of analysis which is, effectively, a system based on doubt. However, what comes to sight is the control of love on life. It seems that Unamuno substitutes the words of Descartes "I think, therefore I am" for "I love, therefore I am".

In the Gospels, Unamuno finds the testimony of the God who was born Man, he suffered, died, and rose again to transmit his pain to the Christians not by a dogmatic faith, but by an agonic one. Christ, at the hour of his death, breathed: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It is this quote from the Human God that Unamuno includes in his *Diary* (Unamuno 1966- 72, vol 5). This Christ that doubts before his Father, shares with us the agony and pain of having been born.

Unamuno believes that doctrines and the mysteries are valid if they reveal our inner selves. The doctrines which the Church teaches are based on the interpretation of its ministries, but it is the doctrines of the Gospels which must be interrogated by each person with simplicity in order to accept its teachings. One must support himself with frequent prayer, which helps to find the truth through the spirit.

Unamuno says that the process of Christianity was due to the teachings of Christ. It is the teaching of Christ according to the Gospels which proves the need to love God and neighbours. Christ created a religion: he did not reform it, nor did he compose it or syncretise it, but rather he created it and he suffered it.

Unamuno, just like Tolstoy, considers everyone who invokes the name of Christ with respect and love to be Christian. He is repulsed by the Orthodox, whether they be Catholic or Protestant, because they deny Christianity to those who do not interpret the Gospels like them.

He corrects the dogma of the Church which says that faith is believing what we did not see. Unamuno reformulates the understanding of faith. For him, faith is creating what we don't see. This definition comes from the tradition of the apostle Saint Paul, who considers faith "the substance of what is hoped for, the demonstration of that which is not seen" (Heb. 11:1). It is in the depths of the soul where uncertainty resides, where reason and the desire of immortality are juxtaposed, and where the hope to create "that which we don't see." Reason may lead to total scepticism, which could end in paralysis of spiritual acting and living; yet when we doubt, we have the potency of hope. From desperation and scepticism is born the comfort which is uncertainty. This uncertainty seems to be, for Unamuno, the basis of a religion's life.

It has become clear that Unamuno develops his doctrine which is based on the teaching of Christ; man may achieve universal love, total compassion. Love personalises when it loves. When love is so great and so alive as when it loves everything, then it personalises everything and discovers that the Universe is a Person also, that it has a Conscience which also suffers, sorrows, and

loves. This Conscience of the Universe “which love discovers personalising when it loves. Suffering is an essential part of human life because suffering in man discovers the hunger for immortality and divinity. It is compassion which makes man leave himself to search around him, in others, the fullness of yearning (Unamuno, 1966- 1972, 2).

Conclusion

There are many convergences between Tolstoy and Unamuno thinking and actions: they were both against the materialism of the church and the interpretation of dogma that only brings benefit to different religious institutions. It also implies that common people who do not follow the historical doctrines of the church cannot count on eternal life. Unamuno in *My Faith and Tolstoy in The response to the Synod* declare that in the first centuries of Christianity, faith was ardent, full of vitality and passion that attracted many to become Christians.

There is further reason for their rejection of the church. As Tolstoy explains in *A Confession*, other denominations do not enjoy the state of equality in relation to Russian Orthodox Church. Tolstoy knows many Catholics, Protestants, Dukhobors and others. According to the Count, the moral life that the faithful are leading, is the true religious and pure life. (The Russian Orthodox Church, on one hand accuses all faithful who do not profess an identical faith to its own and do not express it through the same symbols and similar words to its own to be heretics, on the other hand the members of other denominations accuse the Orthodox of heresies (On Life, 1904).

Unamuno confirms that he considers everyone who respects and loves Christ to be a Christian. He rejects the Orthodox, Catholic or Protestant way of thinking which imposes its own interpretation of the Gospels.

Intellectualism confronts us with the idea that “faith believes in what we did not see”, that is to give more weight to the logical principle and not simply the confidence in life, life that radiates from the spirit and from the people” (On Life, 1904).

The criticism of the dogma present in several of Unamuno’s writings is never as systematic as in the Tolstoy’s essays. Would Unamuno be familiar with Tolstoy’s *My Religion*? A translation of this work is published in 1899 in Paris but no sources can confirm the positive answer. Unamuno also writes a short but important article *My Religion* in 1907, in which he reveals his existential attitude:

“My religion is to look for the truth in life and for life in the truth; my religion is to struggle constantly with the mystery” (My Religion, 1907).

Does this show familiarity with Tolstoy’s earlier work or is it simply coincidence?

In *My Religion* Tolstoy examines the aspects of Christianity that support positivism. Science and philosophy are at the service of the human mind but it is religion that “shows people the way in life” and it is religion that gives sense to human life.

Tolstoy also discusses the dogma of the resurrection, which according to the theologians, teaches us the fundamentals of the Christian faith. Tolstoy believes that this dogma is based on false interpretation and to support such a statement he refers to the different words of the preachers. (My Religion, 1907). In *My Religion* there is no clear mention of the resurrection of Christ. The teachings of Christ, continues Tolstoy, reveal the essence of the human life of Christ who is recognized as the Son of God. Christ teaches us the ways to achieve eternal life, life that is merged with the past, present and future life of humanity.

Tolstoy does not doubt that his own personal life will not last but humanity and life will continue and the fact that we form part of that humanity might redeem us. It is simply a promise of

hope, he says, but it is secure in comparison with the uncertainty of the life beyond.

In a beautiful metaphor Tolstoy says that if somebody tells us that there are bright lights in a far away home, we want to see them; equally, even if the path to salvation is full of thorns, we can find a way to reach it.

Tolstoy explains that the church does not teach the Gospels in a way that encourages life. Has Unamuno been influenced by this particular text, a text in which he finds many converging points with Tolstoy's thinking?

When Tolstoy was a child he understood that the teaching of Christ was to love one another, to be humble, to sacrifice yourself and to be kind and good even to your "enemies". For Unamuno, the pure faith, free of dogma, merges itself with love and confidence in God.

Both writers comment that the way of our understanding Christ depends upon our understanding of the history. Tolstoy and Unamuno accept that the historical Christ was also a man, who just like us, was born, suffered and died doubting his own divinity.

Tolstoy's existential understanding of life is an inspiring force for Unamuno even though it is difficult to establish exactly which of his religious writings Unamuno had read. Both writers, one from Orthodox Russian religion, another from far away Catholic Spain, through their writings project peace and love in spite of their inner struggles. Indeed both are apostles of peace for people in their respective countries. Both are two giants of the world literature who have left thousands of pages of their diaries, essays and novels for their readers to make them think and to find their own peaceful way of living.

Both writers want to find their own truth rather than to accept the truth imposed by the established institutions. They are never passive while confronting injustice. Both are the apostles of a renewed Christianity, based on the tradition of the Gospels. Unamuno and Tolstoy believe that the doctrines of Christ are more compatible with human necessities than the dogma imposed and interpreted by the church which serves the temporal needs of that institution. The religious denomination does not matter; what is important is an individual and his or her feelings. The rituals of the church are not as important as an ethical life; such a life brings us closer to God. Both believe that the rules imposed by churches should not constitute the basis of our religion; it is the constant desire to improve oneself that stimulates faith.

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