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Reason and Religion

Leo Tolstoy

1894

To those who ask my opinion whether it be desirable to endeavor by the aid of reason to attain complete consciousness in one's inner spiritual life, and to express the truths thus attained in definite language, I would answer positively in the affirmative, that every man, in order to achieve his destiny on earth, and to attain true welfare,—the two are synonymous,—must continually exert all his mental faculties to solve for himself and clearly to express the religious foundations on which he lives—that is, the meaning of his life.

I have often found among illiterate laborers who have to deal with cubic measurements an accepted conviction that mathematical calculations are fallacious, and not to be trusted. Whether it arise from their ignorance of arithmetic, or from the fact that those responsible for the calculations have often cheated them, with or without intent, the conviction that mathematics is unreliable and worthless for purposes of measurement has taken root among illiterate workmen, and become for the majority of them an unquestioned fact.

The similar opinion has obtained among men,—I will boldly say, lacking in true religious feelings,—that reason is unequal to the solution of religious questions, that the application of

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reason to such questions is the most fruitful source of error, and that the solution of such questions by the aid of reason is sinful pride.

I mention this because the doubt expressed in the question whether it be needful to strive for distinct consciousness in one's religious convictions may be merely the outcome of the belief that reason cannot be applied to the solution of religious questions.

Man has been given by God one single instrument to attain knowledge of self and of one's relation to the universe; there is no other, and that one is reason.

Yet he is informed that he may use his reason to solve questions, whether domestic, family, commercial, political, scientific, artistic, but not for the elucidation of the problem for which especially it was given him; and that for the solution of the most important truths, of those on an acquaintance with which hangs all his life, man must on no account employ his reason, but must acquiesce in their truth independently of his reason, whereas, independently of reason, man cannot be conscious of anything.

It is said, Accept the truth by revelation, by faith; but a man cannot believe independently of reason. If a man believes this and not that, it is only because his reason tells him that this is credible, and that is not. To affirm that a man must not be guided by reason is equivalent to telling a man who has lost his way in dark catacombs that, in order to find his way out, he must extinguish his lamp, and be guided, not by light, but by something else.

But it may be objected that not every one is endowed with intellect and a special capacity for expressing his thoughts, and that, in consequence, an inadequate expression of these thoughts may lead to error.

To this I would apply the words of the Gospel,—that “things hid from the wise and prudent have been revealed unto babes.” And this statement is neither an exaggeration nor a paradox, as

people are accustomed to view such passages in the Gospels as do not please them, but is an assertion of the simplest and most indubitable truth that unto everything in the universe is given a law which this being must follow, and that to enable each to recognize this law every one is endowed with corresponding organs. Thus every man is endowed with reason, and to the reason of every man is disclosed the law which he must follow. This law is concealed only from those who do not wish to follow it, and who, in order to avoid it, cast reason aside, and instead of using it to become acquainted with truth, accept upon trust the assertions of those who, like them, have surrendered reason.

Yet the law which men should follow is so plain that it is accessible to every child, the more so as no man has to discover anew the law of his life. Those who have lived before him have discovered and expressed it, and he has but to verify it with his reason, and to accept or refuse those propositions which he finds expressed in tradition; that is, not, as recommended by those who would shirk the law, by verifying reason by tradition, but, on the contrary, by verifying tradition by reason.

Traditions may proceed from men, and be false; but reason indubitably comes from God, and cannot be false. Hence for the recognition and expression of truth no special extraordinary capacity is required; one has but to believe that reason is not only the loftiest sacred capacity of man, but moreover is the sole instrument for the understanding of truth.

Particular intellectual qualities are needful, not for the acquirement and expression of truth, but for the concoction and expression of error. Having once deviated from the directions of reason, distrusting it, and believing what others proclaimed as the truth, men accumulate and accept by faith—for the most part in the form of laws, revelations, dogmas—such intricate, unnatural, and contradictory propositions, that, in order to express them and adapt them to life, great acuteness of mind and special qualities are indeed required.

Only imagine a man of our world, educated on the religious basis of any of the Christian confessions,—Catholic, Greek-Orthodox, Protestant,—who wished to elucidate for himself and adapt to his life the religious fundamental ideas with which he has been inoculated in childhood! What an involved mental labor he must face in order to reconcile all the contradictions included in the faith he has imbibed from his youth.

A righteous God has created evil, persecutes men, demands redemption, and so forth; and we, confessing the law of love and mercy, make war, rob the poor, etc.

In order to disentangle these impossible contradictions, or rather in order to conceal them from oneself, much mental capacity and special talent is indeed necessary; but in order to learn the law of one's life, or, as already expressed, to bring one's faith into complete consciousness, no special mental capacity is required; one has but to refuse to admit anything contrary to reason, not to deny reason, religiously to guard one's reason, and to rely on it alone.

If the meaning of life is obscure to any one, one must not therefore conclude that reason is unequal to elucidating that meaning, but merely that too much of what is unreasonable has been admitted upon faith, and that everything uncorroborated by reason must be set aside.

Hence my answer to the question, whether one should try to attain complete consciousness in one's inner spiritual life, is, that this is precisely the most needful and important business of our lives. Most needful and important, because the only reasonable conception of life is the accomplishment of the will of Him who sent us into the world—that is, the will of God. And His will is revealed to us, not by any extraordinary miracle, nor by the divine finger inscribing it on stone, nor by the Holy Ghost composing an infallible book, nor by the infallibility of any special holy person or collection of persons, but by the working of the reason of all men, who pass on to each other

by word and deed the truths which are ever becoming more evident to their consciousness.

This knowledge never has been, and never will be, complete, but augments continually as the life of mankind advances. The longer we live the more clearly and fully do we learn the will of God, and in consequence what we must do to fulfill it.

Therefore, I am firmly convinced that the elucidation and verbal expression (which is an unmistakable token of clearness of idea) of all religious truth accessible to him by every man, however small he may think himself or others may consider him—the least being essentially the greatest—are of the most sacred and most essential duties of man.