

On religion

Mikhail Bakunin

1836

My splendid, my delightful friend Tanyusha; you have no idea what an impression your letter made on me. I am sure you cannot feel all the sweetness and harmonious happiness which I experienced as I read it. And you ask me whether I need your friendship, whether it can contribute to my happiness! Does this mean that you do not realize, you do not see, that to separate myself from you would, for me, be tantamount to breaking with the one and only expression of my inner life? At last I have found this heavenly harmony within my family, I have found this pure and sacred tranquillity, a tranquillity so full of energy, so full of love, a tranquillity which has in it all the future that I have been seeking.

And so you belong to me, you are my sisters, not only by the instinctive laws of nature, but by the life led by our kindred spirits and the identity of our eternal aims. Oh, now I no longer fear the external world! I have found in it what was essential for me; I have found in it more than it usually gives: the echo of your hearts, and your selfless, sacred love. I have found in it golden souls, that belong to eternity rather than to this world. If all external misfortunes and assaults were rolled into one, and tried out their strength on me, they could not wreck my bliss. My bliss cannot be influenced by them, for it is not of this world! My inner life is strong because it is not founded on vulgar expectations or on worldly hopes of outward good fortune; no, it is founded on the eternal purpose of man and his divine nature. Nor is my inner life afraid, for it is contained in your love, and our love is as eternal as our purpose.

Oh, I no longer fear the external world; I will find the means to carry out the plans I have in mind. Now I am not alone, my spirit has been sanctified by your sacred, selfless love. And yet you ask me if I really need your love! It has sanctified and exalted me, it has made me worthy of my calling, and, with its mighty strength, has drawn me on to my everlasting aim. Love is the mighty rod which brings out living water from the rock. Yes, I am happier than I deserve; I am now more than ever under an obligation; I delight in what I have not deserved, and I must deserve the joy given me by providence. Yes, I understand that a sacred duty has been laid upon me, and I will carry it out; I am stronger than I have ever been, I am strengthened by your love!

The earth, my friends, is no longer our inheritance. Our happiness is in heaven and so is our life. Our spiritual activities do not seek the earth or its delights: no, they have already been captivated by true delight, and are indifferent to all that is earthly. Our religion, my friends, is eternal, it contains within it all that is most beautiful, all that is noble. It has nothing in common with what is physical or dead. Our religion gives life to everything, and burning passion and

high ideals are sanctified by it: art, learning, all that is noble in man, all that can excite his soul, all this comes from religion, all this is sanctified by the holy baptism of love that is divine and not of this world, and must reveal the eternal approach of the divinity in man to the divine purpose, to that which has neither end nor beginning, and yet both begins and ends in all that exists. My friends, my religion has made our hearts eternal, it has given us love, love to all mankind; our personal love and our personal life strive to flow into the absolute love and into eternal life.

At this moment I do not hate anybody. I bless everybody. Let us have pity for those who have still not reached our state of bliss. Let us hate only evil, and not the unhappy victims of evil, for they are human beings, and, although they have not fully developed themselves, they too have the right to their divine inheritance, and they alone exclude themselves from it. They are miserable; we must pity them, we must increase our efforts to tear them out of this condition of death and apathy. We must not allow failure to drive us to despair: when will has moral force behind it, it is all-powerful. The moral will of man is the will of God, and nothing can stop its plans being carried out.

And so, my friends, having conquered the moral world, we have at the same time conquered the omnipotent. We desire Good, and Good must prevail in spite of all the onslaughts of Evil. This is our purpose: to widen more and more the sphere of our activity, and at the same time the sphere of our love and our happiness; to cleanse our hearts of all that is worldly, and, continually ennobling them, make them worthy sacrifices of eternal Love; to carry the eternal heaven of our souls into the external world, and in this way to raise the earth up to heaven; even to put into practice, in the external world, ideas that are fine, lofty and noble; ever to draw nearer to a sacred world, and to be united in a mutual purpose, mutual hopes and mutual sacred love; ever to increase and ever to purify our personal love and our personal joy.

My friends, what can stop us, what can make us despair? External, passing sufferings cannot quell the determined soul, and in fact have the opposite effect on it, purifying and ennobling it. Man is never so ready to accept the truth as when he is spiritually sad and in a condition of suffering. It is sorrow that calls up eternity, armoured in finality, and it is sorrow that reveals on high the divinity of man. But sorrow must be conscious, and then it can turn into joy. It is only terrifying for those who have no spiritual life, and who are still not acquainted with heaven. He who has not suffered cannot truly love, because suffering is an act of liberation for man from all earthly expectations, and from his bondage to instinctive, unconscious delights. Therefore, he who has not suffered is not free, and without freedom there is no love, and without love there is no happiness and no bliss.

Therefore, my dear Varya, let not your outward wretchedness lead you to despair. It should, on the contrary, be the basis of your happiness, of your true, divine happiness, of a happiness that is beyond the reach of profanation. Your wretchedness sanctifies you, my dear friend; and if you will allow it to penetrate your consciousness, it will illuminate you and set you on high.

Let religion become the basis and reality of your life and your actions, but let it be the pure and single-minded religion of divine reason and divine love, and not that religion which you used to profess, not the religion which strove to disassociate itself from everything that makes up the substance and life of truly moral existence. This religion is not the restricting whim of some capricious god, nor is it a narrow, icy feeling which opposes all that is perfect in the world of morals and intellect, and threatens to sink itself in a pathetic sphere of activity containing neither ideas nor feelings nor love. At least it is not that religion which was totally inconsistent

with true love, and which might have destroyed a soul as full of fire and thirsting for love and all that is highest as yours, so that it could not have been revived by any moral force.

No, my dear friend, let yourself be penetrated by true religion, by the religion of Christ, for ever free of the defiling touch of those who, in attempting to understand it, inevitably tried to lower it to their level. Look at Christ, my dear friend; He suffered so much, and did not even have the joy of being completely understood by those around Him, and yet He was happy, for He was the Son of God. His life was divine through and through, full of self-denial, and He did everything for mankind, finding His satisfaction and His delight in the dissolution of His material being and in the fact that He was the saviour of mankind. He is the Son of God for He belongs to all men, He is the Son of Man, and He is our pattern. And if we were able to rise up to Him, or rather if we had sufficient faith, sufficient strength, sufficient moral and intellectual breadth to desire this – for indeed we could do this, because we should, and because we All should, then Nothing is impossible – if we could at last attain even a distant impression of the bliss and divine love which He tasted, we should behave as He did, for His suffering was indeed bliss.

This is what religion does. Outward sufferings proceed from the outer world independent of our will. If we are conscious of ourselves without possessing an inner life, then we become the victims of outward sufferings, and we suffer without the possibility of being saved by any sort of outward miracle. But if religion and an inner life appear in us, then we become conscious of our strength, for we feel that God is within us, that same God who creates a new world, a world of absolute freedom and absolute love. Because we have been 'baptized in this world and are in communion with this heavenly love, we feel that we are divine creatures, that we are free, and that we have been ordained for the emancipation of humanity, which is still enslaved, and of the universe, which has remained a victim of the instinctive laws of unconscious existence. Everything that lives, that exists, that grows, that is simply on the earth, should be free, and should attain self-consciousness, raising itself up to the divine centre which inspires all that exist. Absolute freedom and absolute love – that is our aim; the freeing of humanity, and the whole world – that is our purpose.

Pagan stoicism was strong and stoical only because of the instincts of human nature; but let us be strong in the knowledge of our divine nature and of our purpose. Love and eternal bliss create the strength that is within us. Have a careful look at this religion; be assured that all that is perfect in man – art, learning, feeling, thought – belong to it, and that all these varied aspects of human life merely express its different forms. Understand thoroughly that every moment of human life is the revelation of the Holy Spirit, the sole and absolute spirit which speaks in man and forms his consciousness, and that, finally, the gospel is the main source of revelation, and Jesus Christ is above all the Son of God. If you understand all this thoroughly, your life, instead of being poor and restricted, as it was, will become rich and eternal, and the life of all mankind, past and present, will become yours. You will find kindred souls who will no longer be able to remain strangers to you, since you and they will have the same origins. Their purpose, their suffering, their hopes, their moments of extreme joy, will be yours, and will belong to you as they do to them. That is the only and indivisible, harmonious entity, which strives towards absolute harmony and absolute love.

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Of Bakunin, on the theme of religion, we know above all, and perhaps almost exclusively, the phrase: "If God existed, He should be abolished". But this sentence offers us a somewhat partial image of him. Bakunin is also the individual animated by a passionate love for freedom and justice for all human beings. And this impetus comes to him from a deep spirituality which can be found between the lines in his writings of the anarchist period but which appears overwhelmingly in this letter to his sisters. It would be out of place to think that the Bakunin of later years is totally different from the one who appears in this writings. Hence the interest this letter should have for all libertarians, especially those who are allergic and intolerant of any expression of spirituality and religiosity.

Source: From a letter of Bakunin to his sisters, 1836, in, Arthur Lehning ed., Michael Bakunin selected writings, 1973.

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