

Thoughts on God

Leo Tolstoy

Originally written between 1885 & 1900. This version translated in 1904.

God is for me that after which I strive, that the striving after which forms my life, and who, therefore, *is* for me; but he is necessarily such that I cannot comprehend or name him. If I comprehended him, I would reach him, and there would be nothing to strive after, and no life. But, though it seems a contradiction, I cannot comprehend or name him, and yet I know him,— know the direction toward him, and of all my knowledge this is the most reliable.

I do not know him, and yet I always feel terribly when I am without him, and only then do I not feel terribly when I am with him. What is stranger still is this, that in my present life I do not need to know him better and more than I know him now. I can approach him, and I want to, and in this does my life consist, but my approach in no way increases or can increase my knowledge.

Every attempt of the imagination at cognizing him (for example, that he is a creator, or merciful, or something like it) removes me from him and cuts off my approach to him.

Stranger still is this, that I can love him alone as is proper, that is, more than myself and more than anything; in this love alone is there no cessation, no diminution (on the contrary, a constant increase), no sensuality, no terror, no self-satisfaction. Everything good you love through this love, so that it turns out that you love, and so live, through him and by him.

So this is the way I think, or, rather, feel. All I have to add is, that the pronoun *he* somewhat impairs God for me. “He” seems to minimize him.

To the definition of God for me it is necessary to add M. Arnold’s definition, which I have always conceived as one, the chief, side from which God presents himself to us. (M. Arnold deduces his definition from the prophets of the Old Testament, and, indeed, before Christ it is sufficiently full.) God is that endless, eternal principle, which is outside us, leading us, demanding righteousness of us. We may say: the law of human life is God’s will in relation to that part of human life which is in the power of men. I say that this definition was sufficient before Christ, but Christ has revealed to us that the fulfilment of this law, besides its external obligatoriness for human reason, has also another, simpler, internal impulse, which embraces the whole being of man, — namely, love, — not of woman, child, country, and so forth, but love of God (God is love), the love of love, — that very feeling of goodness, meekness of spirit, joy of life, which is the blessed, true, deathless life, characteristic of man.

You know God not so much by means of reason, not even by means of your heart, as by the complete dependence felt in relation to him, something like the feeling which a suckling babe

experiences in the arms of its mother. It does not know who holds it, who warms and feeds it; but it knows that there is somebody who does this, and, moreover, loves this person.

I had formerly seen the phenomena of life, without thinking whence they came, or why I saw them.

Later I understood that everything which I see comes from the light which is the comprehension; and I was so glad of having reduced everything to one principle that I was fully satisfied with the recognition of comprehension alone as the beginning of everything.

Later, however, I saw that the comprehension is the light which reaches me through a hazy glass. I see the light, but I do not know what it is that gives the light: I know only that it exists.

This something which is the source of the light that illumines me, and which I do not know, but of the existence of which I know, is God.

It is remarkable how I could have lived before without seeing the unquestionable truth that beyond this world and our life in it there is some one, something for which this world exists, and we bubble up in it, burst and disappear, like bubbles in boiling water.

You say: "It is impossible to understand how God sat, — sat somewhere in eternity, and suddenly resolved, ' Well, I will create the world,' and began to create, saying all the time, ' It is well.'"

It is true, you and I cannot understand it, when we ask nothing, and are suddenly told so.

But tell me, can we understand that everything which is, has been, and had no beginning? Impossible!

And you say that there is a beginning to everything, and, ascending from beginning to beginning, you have gone very far and by guesses have ascended not seven thousand years, but much farther. And there you see not only the formation of the earth and of everything living upon it, but also the formation of the sun, and much farther— But, no matter how far you have gone, you acknowledge that the beginning of all beginnings is as far off and as inaccessible as ever. And still you continue seeking the beginning of beginnings; to this your vision is turned, and from this, you say, everything was originated.

Well, this very thing, not the part, but the beginning of beginnings, I call God.

Consequently, when I say God, you cannot misunderstand and condemn me. We both of us know him, because we believe alike, and no one can demand of us that we should understand God as such as he is in the Book of Genesis.

We must renounce that by means of which we understand, our reason, that we may understand him as such. Even so no one can demand of Moses that he should understand the heavens, the sun, and the stars better than the earth. The answer of Moses to the question whence we come is the same which you gave: "From the beginning of beginnings, from God."

"But," you will say, "this beginning of beginnings is far from being that which is understood by the word *God*. By this word they understand a being which cares for men. They say that he wrote the law with his finger, appeared in the burning bush, sent his son, and so forth; all that does not exist in a rational comprehension of the beginning."

I agree with such words. In the beginning of beginnings there is not that God.

But as inexplicable as a living, pitying, loving, and angry God is to you, so incomprehensible is to the human mind what he himself is, what his life is.

Tell me what life is, and I will tell you what the living God is.

You say, "Life is a false consciousness of its freedom, of the gratification of its needs, and of the choice between them."

. But whence did this life come?

You say, "It was evolved out of the lower organisms."

But the lower organisms already bore in themselves this consciousness, — and whence did the lower organisms come?

You say, "From the infinite beginning." This I call God.

I say: "The consciousness of my life, the consciousness of freedom is God; but this is not all of God."

In addition to this, that I am, that I live, strive after the gratification of my needs, recognize the freedom of my choice, I have also reason, which guides me in my choice.

Whence is reason? This reason seeks the beginning, struggles with man himself, vanquishes him, subdues his appetites, enacts laws for him. Tell me: Whence comes this reason of man, which enacts laws that are contrary to the impulses of the flesh?

You say: "These laws are from man."

But whence comes man's reason?

"From the evolution of the living?"

And the living from what is not living? But even in the non-living there were these germs. In the detached parts of the rotating sun, there were already the germs of reason. And in the sun and those stars, from which the sun broke loose?

If there is reason, and it is due to evolution, its beginning is just as much concealed in infinity.

Now this beginning of the beginnings of reason is also God.

Both with you and with me there exist the same conceptions of the beginning, which are, that the beginning of life and the beginning of reason merge into one.

You point only to the train of your thought, and I call everything God; the reason I call it so is this, that I must give some name to what you only indicate, and what with you breaks up into three paths of thought.

I frequently meet men who recognize no God except the one which we recognize within ourselves. And I wonder. God is in me. But God is an infinite beginning; how, then, and for what purpose did he turn up in me? You cannot help asking yourself about this, and the moment you ask, you must acknowledge an external cause. Why are people not in need of an answer to this question? Because the answer to this question is for them in the reality of the existing world. It is the same according to Moses, or according to Darwin. And so, in order to understand about the external God, we must understand that what is actually real is only the impression of our feelings, that is, ourselves, our spiritual ego.

What is God? What is God for?

God is all that unlimited which I know as limited in myself; I am a limited body, God is an unlimited body; I am a being that has lived for sixty-three years, God is a being that lives eternally; I am a being that thinks within the limits of my understanding, God is a being that thinks without limitation; I am a being that sometimes loves a little, God is a being that loves always infinitely. I am a part, he is everything. I cannot remember myself otherwise than as a part of him.

When an unsolved question troubles you, you feel yourself a sick member of some kind of a healthy body, — you feel yourself an ailing tooth of a sound body, and you ask the whole body to help the one member.

The whole body is God; I am the member.

One of the superstitions which most puzzles our metaphysical concepts is this: that the world was created, that it came out of nothing, and that there is a creating God.

In reality, we have no ground for assuming a creating God, and there is no need for it the (Chinese and Hindoos do not know this conception); at the same time God the creator and the provider are not compatible with the Christian God the Father, God the Spirit, God, a particle of whom lives in me and forms my life, and the manifestation and evocation of whom forms the meaning of my life, — God the love.

God the creator is indifferent and admits suffering. God the spirit releases from suffering and is always the perfect good. There is no God the creator. There is I who by means of the implements of the sensations given to me cognize the world, and know inwardly my God the Father. He is the beginning of my spiritual ego, but the external world is only my limit.

Frequently people, who are struck down with grief by the death of a beloved being, speak of the evil which God causes to men. When people speak and think thus, they imagine that they believe in God and pray to him.

God does evil. If God does evil, he is not good, — he is not love; and if he is not good, he does not exist.

This is due to the fact that people are so convinced that what they do badly is not only good, but even excellent (as they assure us that to love [excessively] their children is beautiful), that, when they experience that evil which is only the result of their own mistakes, — their sins, they do not accuse themselves, but God. And so they in the depth of their souls recognize God as bad, that is, they deny him, and so receive no consolation from him.

We ought to do what the Dukhobors do, — bow to the ground before each man, remembering that God is in him. If we cannot do so with the body, we may with the spirit.

The consciousness, the sensation of God, who lives in me and acts through me, cannot always be perceived.

There are activities to which we must abandon ourselves completely, inseparably, without thinking of anything but of this work. It is impossible therewith to think of God, — it distracts and is unnecessary.

We must live simply, without effort, abandoning ourselves to our preoccupation; but the moment there appears internal doubt, struggle, dejection, terror, ill-will, we must recognize in ourselves our spiritual being, recognizing our connection with God, at once transfer ourselves from the carnal sphere to that of the spirit, not in order that we may get away from the work of life, but in order, on the contrary, to gather strength for its accomplishment, in order to vanquish and overcome the obstacle. We must, like a bird, move along with the feet, having folded the wings; but the moment there is an obstacle, we must unfold our wings and fly away. And everything is easy, and every difficulty will disappear.

What comes of this, that man recognizes his ego not as a separate being, but as God who is living in him?

In the first place this, that, since he does not consciously wish any good for his separate being, such a man will not deprive others, or will deprive them with less intensity, of their good: in the second place, this, that by recognizing God, who wishes well to everything which exists, as his own ego, man will wish the same.

Prayer is addressed to the personal God, not because he is personal (indeed, I know for certain that he is not personal, because personality is limitation, while God is unlimited), but because I am a personal being. I have a green glass over my eye, and I see everything green; I cannot help but see the world green, though I know that it is not.

This is what has happened with me: I have begun to think more and more abstractly of the questions of life, — of what it consists in, what it tends to, what love is, and I have departed more and more not only from the conception of the Old Testament God the creator, but also from the conception of the Father, of that comprehension of the good, the beginning of all life and of me; and the devil caught me: it began to occur to me that it was possible — an idea which is of especial importance for a union with the Chinese, the Confucianists, the Buddhists, and our infidels, the agnostics — entirely to obviate this conception. I thought that it was possible to be satisfied with the mere conception and recognition of that God who is in me, without recognizing the God in myself, that God who has put a particle of himself into me. And, strange to say, I suddenly began to feel weary, dejected, terrible. I did not know why it was so, but I felt that I had suddenly fallen terribly in spirit, was deprived of every spiritual joy and energy.

And it was only then that I guessed that it was so because I had departed from God. And I began to think, — strange to say, — began to divine whether there was a God, or not, and, as it were, found him anew, and I experienced such joy, and I had such firm confidence in him and in this, that I can and must commune with him, and that he hears me, that these last days I have been experiencing a feeling as though I were very happy, and I ask myself, Why am I so happy? Yes, there is a God, and I do not have to be troubled or fear anything, but can rejoice.

I am afraid that this feeling will pass and become dulled, but now I experience much joy. It is as though I had been within a hair's breadth of losing, and even thought that I had lost, a very dear being, and had really not lost it, but found out its inestimable value. I hope that though this, my most ecstatic mood, may pass, much of what I have newly acquired will remain.

Maybe it is that which some call the living God; if that is so, I am very guilty toward them, since I did not agree with them and disputed their opinions.

The main thing in this feeling is the consciousness of a complete security, the consciousness that he is, that he is good, that he knows me, and that I am on all sides surrounded by him, have come from him, form part of him, am his child; everything which seems bad seems so only because I believe myself, and not him, and out of this life, in which it is so easy to do his will, because this will is at the same time my will, I cannot fall anywhere except into him, and in him there is full joy and goodness.

Everything I may write now will not express what I felt. If I have some physical or moral pain, — a son dies, that which I love perishes, — and I myself can do nothing, and sufferings await me, — I suddenly think, And God? and everything becomes good and happy and clear. . . .

There is not one believer who is not assailed by moments of doubt, of doubt in the existence of God. These doubts are not harmful: on the contrary, they lead to the highest comprehension of God.

That God whom I knew became familiar to me, and I no longer believed in him. A man believes fully in God only when he is revealed anew to him, and he is revealed to man from a new side, when he is sought with a man's whole soul.

I have thought much about God, about the essence of my life, and, it seemed, I doubted both and verified my deductions; and then, lately, I simply just wanted to lean on my faith in God and in the indestructibility of my soul, and, to my surprise, I experienced such a firm, calm confidence as I had never experienced before. Thus all the doubts and verifications apparently not only did not weaken, but even enormously strengthened faith.

One needs never go on purpose to God: "I will just go to God, I will live in godly fashion. I have lived in devilish fashion, and so now will live in a godly way,— I will try, maybe it is no

misfortune.” It is a misfortune, and a great one at that. To God, as in marrying, one must go only when one would like not to go, and would like not to marry, but cannot help oneself. . . . And so I will not say to everybody: “Go purposely into offences;” but to him, who puts the question like this, Shall I not make a mistake if I go to God, instead of going to the devil? I will shout with might and main, “Go, go to the devil, by all means to the devil.” It is a hundred times better to burn oneself on the devil than to stand on the crossway or hypocritically to go to God.

I have read Spencer’s answer to Balfour: it is the confession of agnosticism, as they now call atheism.

I say agnosticism, though it wants to be something different from atheism in that it advances a certain impossibility of knowledge; but in reality it is the same as atheism, because the root of everything is the non-recognition of God.

So I read Spencer, who says: “It is not that I *wish* to reject the faith in God, but that I *must*: self-deception is the alternative. There is no pleasure,” he says, “in the consciousness of being a small bubble on a globe that is in itself infinitesimal compared with the totality of things.” (I should like to ask him what he means by totality of things.) “Those on whom the unpitiful rush of changes inflicts sufferings which are often without remedy find do consolation in the thought that they are at the mercy of blind forces which cause, indifferently, now the destruction of a sun and now the death of an animalcule. Contemplation of a universe which is without conceivable beginning or end, and without intelligible purpose, yields no satisfaction. The desire to know what it all means is no less strong in the agnostic than in others, and raises sympathy with them. Failing utterly to find any interpretation himself, he feels a regretful inability to accept the interpretation they offer.”

Precisely the same thing FT—— told me the other day:

“There takes place a kind of circular motion, and amidst this motion, endless in time and space, I appear, and live, and disappear, — so much is certain. But everything else, that is, the conception of a rational being from whom I came, and for the attainment of whose purpose I exist, together with everything which exists, — such a conception is self-deception.”

These two variant and opposite world conceptions must be represented as follows:

Some, the agnostics, say: “I see myself, a being born of my parents, such as all the living beings which surround me and which live in certain conditions that are subject to my investigation and study, and I study myself and the other beings, both the animate and the inanimate, and those conditions in which they live; and I arrange my life in conformity with this study. Questions of origin I investigate in the same manner, and by observation and experience attain greater and greater knowledge. But the question as to whence all this world came, why it exists, and I in it, I leave unanswered, as I see no possibility of answering it as definitely, clearly, and convincingly as I answer the questions in regard to everything which exists in the universe. And so I do not recognize the answer to this question, which is, that there exists a rational being, God, from whom I originate” (Generally they say “from whom the universe has its beginning,” meaning by this origin the creation of the universe, which the Christian teaching does not assert), “and who has determined the law of my life for certain purposes of his own, — this answer to the question I do not recognize, since it has not that clearness and conclusiveness which the scientific answers have in respect to questions of causes and conditions of various vital phenomena.” Thus speaks the agnostic, and, by not admitting the possibility of any other knowledge than the one which is obtained by means of observation and of reflection on these observations, he is, though not right, at least logically quite consistent.

But a Christian, a man who recognizes God, says: "I recognize myself as living only because I recognize myself as a rational being; since I recognize myself as rational, I cannot help but acknowledge that my life and that of everything in existence must be just as rational. In order to be rational, it must have a purpose. Now, the purpose of this life must be outside me, in that being for whom I and everything in existence serve as a tool for the accomplishment of his purpose. This being exists, and I must in life fulfil his law (will). But the questions as to what this being is that demands of me the fulfilment of its law, and when this rational life in me had its beginning, and how it originates in other beings in time and space, that is, what God is, whether personal or impersonal, how he created, and whether he created the world, and when the soul arose in me, and at what age, and how it originates in others, and whence it comes and whither it goes, and in what part of the body it lives, — all these questions I must leave unanswered because I know in advance that in the sphere of observation and reasoning concerning them I shall never arrive at a final answer, since everything will be concealed in time and space. For this reason I do not admit the answers given by science as to how the world, the suns, the earth began, how the soul begins, and in what part of the cerebral brain it is to be found."

In the first case, the agnostic, by acknowledging himself to be only an animal being, and so recognizing only this, that he is subject to external sensations, does not recognize the spiritual principle and is reconciled to the stupidity of his existence, which violates the demands of reason. In the second case, the Christian, by recognizing himself only as a rational being, and so recognizing only that which corresponds to the demands of reason, does not acknowledge the actuality of the data of external experimentation, and so regards these data as fantastical and erroneous.

Both are equally right. But the difference, the material difference, between them is this, that according to the first world conception everything in the world is strictly scientific, logical, and rational, with the exception of the life of man himself and of the whole universe, which has no meaning; and so, in spite of all attempts to the contrary, there result from such a world conception many interesting and amusing reflections, but nothing needful for guidance in life; while according to the second world conception the life of man and of the whole universe receives a definite and rational meaning, and a very direct, simple, and accessible application to life, whereby the possibility of scientific investigations is not excluded, except that these investigations occupy their appropriate place.

Nothing proves better the existence of God than the attempts of the evolutionists at recognizing morality and deducing it from the struggle.

It is evident that it cannot result from struggle; and yet they feel that they cannot get along without it, and so try to deduce it from their propositions, although to deduce it from the theory of evolution is as strange or even stranger and more illogical than to deduce it from the precepts given by the Jewish God on Sinai. Their error, which consists in this, that they deny the consciousness of their spiritual ego as the production of God, of a part of him, without whom there can be no rational world conception, compels them to admit the unjustified and even contradictory mystery, that is, in respect to morality, of that very God whom they have excluded from their world conception.

The other day a Frenchman asked me whether morality would not be sufficiently well based on goodness and beauty, that is, again on God, whom they, by dint of the spiritual disease which assails them, are afraid to name.

They say: "God must be understood as a personality."

There is here a great misconception: personality is limitation. Man feels himself as a personality, only because he is in contact with other personalities. If man were alone, he would not be a personality. The two conceptions, the outer world, — other beings, — and personality, define one another. If there did not exist a world of other beings, man would not feel himself (would not be conscious of) as a personality, — he would not recognize the existence of other beings. Thus man in the world cannot be thought of otherwise than as a personality. But how can we say of God that he is a personality, that God is personal? In this lies the root of anthropomorphism. Of God we can say only what Moses and Mohammed said, — that he is one; not one in the sense that there is no other God, — in relation to God there cannot be the concept of number, and so we cannot say that he is one (one in the sense of a number), — but in this sense, that he is uncentric, that he is not a concept, but a being, — what the Orthodox call a living God, in contradistinction to the pantheistic God, that is, a higher spiritual being which lives in everything. He is one in this sense, that, as a being, he exists, and may be turned to, that is, not exactly by praying, — which is a relation between me, a limited being, a personality, and incomprehensible, but existing God. The chief incomprehensibility of God consists even in this, that we know him as one being, — we cannot know him otherwise, — and yet we cannot understand one being as filling everything. If God is not one, he melts away, he does not exist. If he is one, we involuntarily imagine him in the form of personality, and then he is no longer a higher being, no longer everything. And yet, in order that we may know God and lean on him, we must understand him as filling all and at the same time as one.

The world is such as we see it, only if there do not exist any other beings, besides ourselves, who are differently organized and endowed by different sensations. But if we see, not only the possibility, but also the necessity, of the existence of other beings, who are endowed with other sensations than are ours, then the world is in no case only such as we see it.

Our conception of the world shows only our relation to the world, just as a visual picture, which we form for ourselves because we see as far as the horizon, in no way represents the actual definition of visible objects. The other sensations, those of hearing, smell, and chiefly touch, by verifying our visual impressions, give us a more definite conception of the visible objects; but the fact that we know the visible objects as broad, thick, hard, or soft, and how they sound and smell, does not prove that we know these objects well, and that a new sense (in addition to the five), if it were given to us, would not reveal to us that our conception of things, as formed by the five senses, is as deceptive as that conception of flatness and diminution of objects in the perspective, which vision alone gave us.

I see a man in the mirror, hear his voice, and am fully convinced that this is a real man; but I come nearer, want to take his hand, and touch the glass of the mirror, and see my deception. The same must take place with a dying man: a new feeling is born, which reveals to him (both through the new feeling and the new knowledge given to him) the deception of the consciousness of his body and of all that which by means of the senses of this body was recognized by him as existing.

Thus the world is certainly not such as we know it: there will be other instruments of perception, and there will be another world. But no matter how that which we call the world — our relation to the world — may change, one thing is indubitably such as we perceive it, and always unchangeable, — it is that which perceives. And it perceives not only in me, but in everything which perceives. This perceiving one is everywhere and in everything and in itself. It is God and that for some reason limited particle of God, which forms our actual ego.

But what is this God, that is, the eternal, infinite, all- powerful, which has become mortal, limited, feeble? Why has God divided in himself? I do not know, but I know that it is, that in this is life. Everything which we know is nothing but just such a division of God. Everything which we cognize as the world is the cognition of these divisions. Our cognition of the world (what we call matter in space and time) is a contiguity of the limits of our divinity with its other divisions. Birth and death are transitions from one division into another.

The severest and most consistent agnostic recognizes God, whether he wants to or not. He cannot help but recognize that, in the first place, in his own existence and in that of the whole world, there is a certain meaning which is inaccessible to him; in the second place, that there is a law of his life, — a law to which he can submit, or from which he can depart. Now, this very acknowledgment of a higher meaning of life, which is inaccessible to man, but inevitably exists, and of the law of his life, is God and his will.

Such a recognition of God is much firmer than the recognition of God as creator, Trinity, redeemer, provider, and so forth. To believe in this manner is like digging a foundation down to the rock, to the bottom rock, and then building a house on it.

Men know two Gods: one, whom they wish to make subservient to themselves, by demanding of him through prayers the execution of their wishes, and another, such as we ought to serve, to the fulfilment of whose will all our wishes must be directed.

Everything I know I know, because there is a God, and I know him. On this alone can we rear a firm foundation, in relation to men and to ourselves, and to the extra-terrestrial and extra-temporal life. I not only fail to find this mystical, but, on the contrary, find that the opposite view is mysticism, while this is a most intelligible and accessible reality.

Nature, they say, is economical with its forces: with the least effort it obtains the greatest results. Even so is God. In order to establish in the world the kingdom of God, unity, and the service of one another, and to destroy enmity, God does not need to do so himself. He has imparted to man his reason, which frees love in man, and everything he wishes will be done by man. God does his work through us. There is not time for God, or it is infinite. Having implanted rational love in man, he has done everything.

Why did he do so, through man, and not in himself? A foolish question, such as would never have occurred to us, if we were not all spoiled by the insipid superstitions of the creation of the world by God.

There is no doubt that something is being done in this world, and that it is done by all living beings, and by me, by my life. Otherwise, why should there be this sun, these springs and winters, and, above all, this three-year- old girl, wanton from a superabundance of life, and this doting old woman, and this madman. These separate beings, who evidently have no meaning for me, and yet live so energetically and preserve their life so well, in whom life is screwed in so firmly, — these beings convince me more than anything that they are needed for some rational, good work, which is not comprehensible to me.

Once, while praying to God, it became clear to me that God was indeed a real being, love, — that he was all that which I embrace with a small edge and feel in the form of love. And it is not a sensation, an abstraction, but a real being: I felt him.

To love means to wish what a beloved object wishes. The objects of love wish the love of the other side, and so we can love what wishes one and the same. God wishes one and the same.

The love of God means to love what God wishes; but he wishes well to everything.

“Brothers, let us love one another! He who loves is born of God and knows God, because (it says, God is love, but we ought to say) love is God.” However, God is also love, that is, we know God only in the form of love, and love is God, that is, if we love, we are not gods, but God.

Yes, love is God. Love, love him who has done you harm, whom you have condemned, and have not loved, and everything which concealed his soul from you will disappear, and you will see, as through clear water, the divine essence of his love at the bottom, and you will not have to forgive him, and will not be able to do so: you will have only to forgive yourself for not having loved

God in him in whom he was, and for not having seen him in your wanting love.

Love is the manifestation (consciousness) of God in oneself, and so the striving to get out of oneself, be freed, live a divine life. This striving evokes God, that is, love to others.

My chief thought is that love evokes love in others; God, awakened in you, causes an awakening of the same God in others.

I went on horseback from Tula, and thought about my being a part of him, which in a certain way is separated from the other parts. He is all, the Father. And I felt love for him. Now, especially now, I am unable to reproduce, and even recall, that feeling. I felt so happy that I said to myself: I thought that I should not find out anything new, and now I have learned a remarkable, blissful, new sensation, yes, a sensation.

Lying in bed to-day, I thought of love to God ... (I wanted to say love of God, that is, divine love) — that the first and chief commandment is divine love, and the second, similar to it, and resulting from it, — yes, resulting from it, — is love of our neighbour.

The desire of good is not God, but only one of his manifestations, — one of the sides from which we see God. God manifests himself in me as a desire for good.

God, who is contained in man, at first strives to free himself, in order to widen and increase the being in whom he is; then, noticing the unforeseen limits of this being, he strives to free himself, in order that he may go out of this being and embrace other beings.

A rational being is not contained in the life of a personality, and since it is rational, it strives to come out of it.

The Christian teaching reveals to man that the essence of his life is not his separate being, but God, who is contained in this being. But this God is cognized by man as reason and love.

The desire for good for oneself, love of oneself, could have existed in man only so long as reason did not wake up in him. The moment reason woke in him, it became clear to man that the desire for good for himself, a separate being, is vain, because the good is not realizable for a separate and mortal being. As soon as reason appeared, only one desire for good became possible, — the desire for good for everything, because with the desire for good for everything there is no struggle, but union; not death, but transmission of life.

God is not love, but in the living irrational beings he manifests himself as love for themselves, in the living rational beings as love for everything existing.

Why are you so dispirited? You are expecting something great. You are waiting, it seems to me, for God in thunders and in storm, and not in stillness. The best is that there is “no place in which to give,” as you say. In this the hand of God is most visible and perceptible.

You say that it looks as though I did not acknowledge God. There is some misunderstanding here. I acknowledge nothing but God.

I think I have written to you and told you my definition of God, which I would now give as an answer to the question as to what God is. God is all that infinite something of which I am

conscious of being a part. And so everything in me borders on God, and I feel him in everything. This is not an empty phrase, but that by **which I live**.

I agree with you, no, I think like you in what you say about the comprehension and about God. I do not say I agree, because, speaking of these subjects, it is hard to express them precisely, and words may say too much or too little, and so it is impossible ever to recognize a given formulation as completely corresponding to one's comprehension. All I feel is that we think and feel in the same direction, and this gives me much pleasure. It is impossible not to think of these subjects, but each involuntarily thinks in his own way; it is not only useless, but it may be dangerous, to formulate them in such a way as they did in the symbols of faith. "What we can and must formulate are the conclusions, as applied to life, as Moses did, Thou shalt not kill, and Christ, Resist not evil. But I repeat that I think in the same direction and fully agree with you that the measure of the comprehension is given according to purity, humility, and love.

We shall try to say what we know, what is necessary, joyful, and indubitable to us, and God (the same that you *think* we ought to obviate) will help us. In naming him, I acknowledge my insufficiency, and try — I his weak, partial vessel — to disclose myself, that part of myself which receives him, in order that he may enter me, so far as I can receive him and am worthy to. But the chief thing is, I need him in order that I may express whither I am going, and to whom I am going. In this uniform earthly life I may not feel him and get along without this form of thought and expression, but in passing over from the former life into this, and from this into another, I cannot help but call that whence I come and whither I go God, because this is the manner of expression which is nearest to the real meaning of the matter: from God to God, — from the extra-temporal and extra-spatial into the same.

What am I here, who am cast amidst this world? To whom shall I turn? From whom shall I expect an answer?

From men? They do not know; they laugh and do not wish to know, saying: "These are trifles. Do not think of them. Here is the world with its joys,— live"

But they will not deceive me. I know that they do not believe in what they say. They are tormented like myself, and suffer terror before death, before themselves, and before thee, O Lord, whom they will not name.

And I, too, did not name thee for a long time, and for a long time did the same as they do. I know this deception, and how it oppresses the heart, and how terrible the fire of despair is, which is concealed in the heart of him who does not name thee. No matter how much you may flood him, he will burn your inside, even as he burned me.

But, O Lord, I have named thee, and my suffering has come to an end. My despair has passed.

I curse my weaknesses, I seek thy way; but I do not despair, — I feel thy nearness, thy aid, when I walk thy ways, and forgiveness, when I depart from them.

Thy way is clear and simple. Thy yoke is good and thy burden light, but I wandered for a long time off thy ways: in the abomination of my youth I, in my pride, threw off every burden, unhitched myself from every yoke, and taught myself not to walk in thy ways. Thy yoke and thy burden are hard for me, though I know that they are good and light.

O Lord, forgive me the errors of my youth and help me to bear thy yoke as joyfully as I receive it.

Awhile ago, as I was left alone after my occupations, I asked myself what I should do, and I had no personal wish (except the bodily needs, which rise only when I want to eat or drink); I felt

so clearly the joy of the consciousness of God's will that I needed nothing and wanted nothing except to do what he wishes.

This feeling arose in consequence of the question which I proposed to myself when I was left alone in the stillness: Who am I? Why am I? And so clearly the answer came of itself: Whoever and whatever I may be, I am sent by some one to do something. Well, let me do that. And it gave me such joy and pleasure to feel my uniting with God's will.

This is my second living feeling of God. Before I just felt love for God. Now I cannot recall how it was; all I remember is that it was a joyous sensation.

Oh, what happiness solitude is! Today I am so happy to feel God.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Leo Tolstoy
Thoughts on God
Originally written between 1885 & 1900. This version translated in 1904.

[<archive.org/details/myreligiononlife00tols>](http://archive.org/details/myreligiononlife00tols)
Translated by Leo Wiener. From Tolstoy's diaries, private letters, memorandum-books, drafts of unfinished writings, and similar unpublished private papers.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net