

LETTER OF VLADIMIR SOLOVIEF TO  
L. M. TOLSTOY<sup>1</sup>

*St. Petersburg, July 28th—August 2nd, 1894.*

DEAR L. M.,

Since I last wrote to you I have been twice seriously ill, so I will not postpone further the important talk I owe you.

It seems to me that all our differences may be reduced and focussed into one concrete point—the Resurrection of Christ. I think from your own point of view (if I have understood your last writings correctly) there is nothing to prevent you from acknowledging the truth of the Resurrection: there is even something which compels you to acknowledge it. I shall first speak of the idea of the Resurrection in general, and then of Christ's Resurrection. (1) You admit that our world changes progressively, passing from inferior forms and grades of life to higher and more perfect forms. (2) You admit the reciprocal action of the inward and outward (physical) life, and: (3) upon the ground of this reciprocal action you admit that the perfection of the spiritual being is expressed by its complete control of its own physical life, by subjugating and taking possession of it. Starting from these three points, I imagine we necessarily attain the truth of the Resurrection. In fact, the spiritual power in relation to the material being is not a permanent but an increasing proportion. In the animal kingdom it generally exists in a hidden poten-

<sup>1</sup> This letter is not included in the complete edition of Solovief's works and, as far as we know, has not been hitherto published. We are indebted to Countess Bennigsen for the translation which she has very kindly and courteously given us permission to publish.—EDITOR.

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tial state; in mankind it is set free and becomes visible. But this liberation is effected at first only as an ideal, in the shape of a rational consciousness. I differentiate myself from my animal nature, I realise my inward independence of it. But can such *consciousness* become *action*? Not only it can, but to a certain extent it does. As in the animal world we find some rudiments or gleams of a rational life, so in mankind we are certain of the existence of the rudiments of that supremely perfect condition in which the spirit actually takes possession of the material life. It fights the dark tendencies of its material nature and conquers them (not merely differentiates them from itself). Upon this inward spiritual perfection depends the greater or lesser completeness of the victory. The ultimate victory of the hostile material principle is death—*i.e.*, the release of the chaotic existence of the material parts and the destruction of the links by which nature held them together. Death is the visible victory of the irrational over the rational, chaos over cosmos. This is especially manifest as regards the higher beings in the scale of creation. Man's death is the destruction of a perfect organism, a befitting shape, and an instrument of a higher rational life. Such a victory of the lower over the higher, such a capitulation of the spiritual principle bears witness to the latter's insufficient strength. But this strength *grows*. Immortality is for man what reason is for the animal; the meaning of the animal kingdom is the rational animal—*i.e.*, man. The meaning of mankind is the immortal—*i.e.*, Christ. As the animal world gravitates towards reason, so does mankind towards immortality. If the fight against chaos and death is the very essence of the world's process whereby the luminous spiritual element *conquers*—though it be only slowly and gradually that it conquers—then the Resurrection—

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*i.e.*, the actual and final victory of the living being over death is the necessary moment of this process which in principle ends here; all further progress, strictly speaking, possesses only an extensive character, consists in the universal assimilation of this individual victory or the extension of its consequences upon all mankind and the whole universe. If by the word *miracle* is to be understood a fact contradicting the usual course of events and therefore impossible, then the Resurrection is in direct opposition to a miracle—it is a *fact* absolutely indispensable for the general course of things. But if by miracle is to be understood an unusual occurrence, happening for the first time, then the Resurrection of the ‘first-begotten of the dead’ is certainly a miracle akin to the first appearance of the first organic cell in the inorganic universe, or of the first animal amidst the primeval vegetation, or of the first man amongst orang-outangs. These miracles are not questioned by natural history, so the miracle of the Resurrection is as undeniable in the history of mankind. Of course from the point of view of mechanical materialism all this is *nul et non avenu*. But I would be much surprised to hear from your point of view some objection on principle. I am convinced that for you, too, the idea of the Resurrection of the ‘first-begotten of the dead’ is as natural as it is for me. But the question may be asked whether this was actually realised by the historical Person Whose Resurrection is recorded in the Gospels. Here are the reasons by which I affirm my belief in the Resurrection of that man, Jesus Christ, as ‘first-begotten of the dead.’

(1) Victory over death is the inevitable natural consequence of inward perfection. The man in whom the spiritual principle decisively and definitely conquered everything highest cannot be defeated by death; having attained the fulness of its perfection

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the spiritual power inevitably pours over, so to say, the brim of the subjective psychic life, takes possession also of the flesh, transforms it, and finally spiritualises it, irrevocably assimilating it to itself. And in the Christ of the Gospels I find this image of full spiritual perfection. For many reasons useless to give here, I refuse to consider this image an invention, just as you, too, refuse to consider the Christ of the Gospels a mere myth. So, if this spiritually perfect man actually lived, then he was certainly 'the first-begotten of the dead,' and we have not to expect any other.

(ii) Allow me to illustrate the second reason of my faith by an example from another sphere. When by certain calculations the astronomer Le Verrier became convinced that beyond the orbit of Uranus another planet existed and subsequently perceived it through the telescope as he expected to find it, doubtless he had no reasonable cause to think that this planet seen by us is not the one he discovered, not the real one, but that the planet would perhaps be found some time later. Thus, when on the strength of the general significance of the universal and historical process and its consistent stages we find that, following the manifestation of the spiritual principle in the shape of ideas in the philosophy and art of the Greeks on the one hand, and on the other in the ethical-religious ideal of the Hebrew prophets (the idea of the kingdom of God)—the next supreme moment of this revelation would have to be the apparition of this same spiritual principle, its *personal* and *real* incarnation in a living being, who not in thoughts and artistic images only, but *actually* had to manifest the power and victory of the spirit over the hostile evil principle with its ultimate expression—Death; *i.e.*, had actually to resurrect his material body into the spiritual. And when we find that the eye-witnesses, illiterate Jews, without

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any notion of the universal process, its stages and moments, give us the description of just such a man who personally and actually embodies the spiritual principle and that with wonder, as of an event unexpected by them and incredible, they tell us that this man rose from the dead—*i.e.*, record in quite an empirical way as a sequence of events what for us has an inward logical connection—seeing this coincidence we have decidedly no right to suspect these witnesses of inventing a fact the full significance of which was not clear to them. Such a suspicion would be as if we imagined that though the workmen who constructed the telescope of the Paris Observatory knew nothing of Le Verrier's discovery, they yet purposely arranged things so that he should perceive through the telescope, a vision of a non-existent Neptune!

(iii) I shall say only a few words upon the foundation of my faith in the Resurrection, for it is too well known—a fact, however, which by no means makes it less convincing. It is that without this fact of the Resurrection the extraordinary enthusiasm of the Apostolic community would have had insufficient cause, and in general the history of primitive Christianity would have been a chain of impossibilities; unless we own (as some do) that the first century of Christian history never existed at all and it began straight from the second or even the third century!

Personally, from the time when I became convinced that the history of the world and of mankind had a meaning, I have had not the slightest doubt of the truth of the Resurrection; and all arguments against it by their very feebleness only strengthen my faith.

The only serious and original objection I know of comes from you. Some time ago you told me that were we to acknowledge the Resurrection, and con-

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sequently the special supernatural significance of Christ, Christians would rely for their salvation more upon the mystical power of this supernatural being than upon their own moral endeavour. But such an abuse of the truth would ultimately end by the condemnation of its perpetrators. As Christ, though risen, can do nothing final for us without our own co-operation, so for sincere and conscientious Christians there ought to be no danger of quietism. This danger might perhaps exist, did the risen Christ possess for them a visible reality; but under actual conditions when the real personal union with Him can only be spiritual—which presupposes man's own moral effort—only hypocrites or scoundrels can refer to Grace to *the detriment* of moral obligations. And also the God-man is not the all-absorbing 'Absolute' of Eastern mystics, and union with Him cannot be one-sidedly passive. He is the 'first-begotten of the dead,' the One who shows the Way, the leader and banner for an active life, for struggle and self-improvement, and not for absorption in the Nirvâna. However, whatever the practical consequences of Christ's Resurrection, the question of its *truth* is not settled by them. I would be much interested to hear what you have to say upon this question. If you prefer, I shall wait for a personal meeting.

Yours . . . .

VLADIMIR SOLOVIEF.