CHAPTER VI

HIS RELATION TO GOD

As the subject under examination is Tolstoy and his search for the meaning of life and religion, it is essential to understand his attitude towards God because it has got a certain bearing on the matter. Under life, religion, God, have been interrelated and since times immemorial contributed to the explanation of life. A belief in God led to an understanding of life and religion by him.

Maxim Gorky wrote about him once that "the idea that destroys his peace of mind more frequently than any other, is the idea of God. Sometimes this seems to be not an idea, but a tense resistance to something by which he feels he is dominated. He does not speak about it as much as he would like to, but thinks about it continually."¹ He was of course possessed strongly with a desire to search for God because if he was able to explain God that might possibly explain the mystery of life as well.

In *A Confession* he recorded an incident which makes us realize his early curiosity about God, and also a tendency in him to doubt what could not be conclusively proved, even God. He wrote that when he was about eleven years old a grammar school pupil visited his family one day and told them of the latest novelty of a discovery made at his school. That discovery was that there was no God and all which was told about Him was mere invention. At that startling information he and his brothers became very animated and thought that to be very interesting and quite possible.¹

That there was a passionate desire in his mind to believe in God, to love Him, to throw himself at His benediction, is evident from an extract in his diary written on June 11, 1651:

Yesterday I hardly slept all night. Having posted up my diary, I prayed to God. It is impossible to convey the sweetness of the feeling I experienced during my prayer. I said the prayers I usually repeat by heart: 'Our Father', 'To the Virgin', & c., and still remained in prayer....I wished to merge into the Universal Being. I asked Him to pardon my crimes....I combined in one feeling both petition and gratitude. Fear quite vanished. I could not have separated any one emotion - faith, hope, or love - from the general feeling. No, this was what I experienced yesterday: it was love of God, lofty love, uniting in itself all that is good, excluding all that is evil....Now I asked God with a pure heart to accept

The assumption of the existence of God is an hypothesis supported by indications. And faith, in accordance with man's development, complements the correctness of that hypothesis. 2

Analyzing his attitude towards God Tolstoy wrote in A Confession that his search for God did not proceed from reason but from feeling. It was a feeling of fear, orphanage, isolation, and a hope of help from someone. Though he was quite convinced of the impossibility of proving the existence of a Deity, as Kant had tried to prove, yet he sought for God and hoped to find Him. He tried to verify the arguments of Kant and Schopenhauer showing the impossibility of proving the existence of God. He reasoned that Cause was not a category of thought as were Time and Space. If he existed there must be some cause for that, and a cause of causes. And that first cause of all was God. As soon as he

1 As quoted in Aylmer Maude, The Life of Tolstoy, I, 64-5.
2 Ibid., I, 67-8.
acknowledged that there was a force in whose power he was he felt that he could live. But soon his critical mind began questioning: what was that cause? How was he to think of that? What were his relations to that he called God? In reply to those questions only the familiar replies occurred to him, that He was the Creator and Preserver. He did not feel satisfied and found himself agitated as before.

But once again his mind started building that argument anew. He thought that he could not have come to the world without any cause, reason, or meaning. There must be some power which brought him to the world. That power was God. He was able to convince himself yet again that He existed, and with that the quest for living arose within him with renewed vigour. For the moment he felt the possibility and joy of being. But even that proved to be short-lived. When from the admission of the existence of God he went to seek his relation to Him he could imagine only that God — the Creator in Three Persons who sent His Son, the Saviour — and again that God detached from the world and Him melted like a block of ice before him. The old darkness engulfed him yet again and the spring of life dried up within
him as before. The intensity of his search may be gathered from the fact that not two or three times but 'tens and hundreds of times' he reached that condition, first of joy and animation and then of despair and the impossibility of living.

One day while alone in the wood his thoughts once more turned to God.

"Very well, there is no God", said I to myself; "there is no one who is not my imagination but a reality like my whole life. He does not exist, and no miracles can prove His existence, because the miracles would be my imagination, besides being irrational.

"But my perception of God, of Him whom I seek," I asked myself, "where has that perception come from?"

At that new understanding of Him the glad waves of life rose within him again. All around him was brightened and the life appeared to have a meaning. But his mind continued its work. The conception of God was not God. The conception took place within him and he could evoke it or refrain from evoking. That was not what he sought. He sought that without which there could be no life. Again he was in despair and wished to kill himself.

He realized that he lived only at those times when he believed in God, and the moment that belief was shaken he felt dying. That made him think what was

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that animation and dying? Why he lived when he had a faith in God but felt dying when he lost that faith? He came to the conclusion that what made him live was God. He was that without which one could not live. God was life. All around him and within him was lit up and the urge to live returned.

And he returned to the belief in that Will which had brought him to the world and desired something of him. Alongwith that he came to believe that the chief aim of his life was to be better by living in accord with that Will. He understood that he could find the expression of that Will in what the humanity had found for its guidance in the distant past. For all that he had a subconscious acceptance in his mind since the early days but he came to accept it later on after a painful search that without it he could not live.

We note that though Tolstoy wavered in his belief of God and was at times sceptical of Him, yet he did come to believe in Him finally. A belief in God was essential to his explanation of life and religion in the early as well as the later phase. In the early phase God was referred to as the Father-spirit. The life of spirit, in which lay the salvation of man, was depen-
dent upon the conception of Father-spirit or God. To live the life of spirit was to act in accord with the will of that higher power, and thereby the realisation of the kingdom of God upon earth. It was the explanation of life with the aid of Christ's faith, which in itself was dependent upon God.

In the later phase he so defined religion that it inevitably formed a part of man's life. According to him, there were three principal relations in which man stood towards universe: the first personal or pagan; the second social or family-state; and the third the Christian or divine. The third relationship, the highest and to which man was getting increasing awareness, consisted in fulfilling the will of God who created man and the universe. Further, his definition of religion explicitly admitted God when he remarked that religion was a relation which man established to the eternal life and to God in accordance with reason and contemporary knowledge.

But what was Tolstoy's conception of God exactly? As he wrote in A Confession he did not believe in God as a deity.¹ What he understood of God could be gathered from the following extracts of his writing:

¹p. 68.
He wrote in his diary in 1880: I instinctively thought of prayer. To whom? What is God, imagined so clearly that one can petition Him, communicate with Him? If I even imagine Him to myself as such, He loses for me all grandeur. A God who can be petitioned and who can be served, is an expression of mental weakness. He is God just because His whole nature is such as I cannot imagine to myself. Yes, He is not a Being, but a Law and a Force.¹

In a letter to N.A. Engelhardt in 1869 he wrote: You say that the meaning of Christianity lies in loving God and our neighbour as ourselves. But what is God? What does 'to love' mean? What is meant by loving something incomprehensible — God?...

These words have for me this meaning: To love God means to love truth; to love my neighbour as myself means to recognise the unity of my essence, my soul and life, with every other human life, with eternal truth, with God.²

At another place he wrote: I believe in this: I believe in God, whom I understand as Spirit, as love, as the Source of all.³

While Tolstoy was on his deathbed he wrote in his diary: God is the illimitable All; man is but a limited manifestation of Him.

Or, even better — God is that illimitable All of which man is conscious of being a limited part.... God is not love, but the more love there is in man the more is God manifest in Him, and the more truly does he exist.⁴

Maxim Gorky quoted him saying about God as "That of which my soul is a particle. That's all. Anyone who has learned to think finds it hard to believe, but one can only live in God through faith. Tertullian said: 'Thought is evil."⁵

All these different conceptions of God mean that

¹As quoted in Aylmer Maude, The Life of Tolstoy, I, 360. Italics mine.
⁴As quoted in Aylmer Maude, The Life of Tolstoy, II, 509. Italics mine.
Tolstoy was not definite about Him. In turn he is referred to as law and force, truth, spirit, love, the source of all, illimitable all of which man is a limited part, and that of which soul is a particle. At the basis of his conception of God lay something universal, infinite, all-comprehensive whole. It was the totality of being that he conceived of as God. Yet, we feel what Gorky wrote about him that "His relations with God are indefinite...."1

But, the indefinite attitude of Tolstoy to God did not affect his explanation of life and religion as he came to understand that in the final sense. According to him, the highest understanding of life consisted in fulfilling the will of God. His will was fulfilled when man worked for the betterment of life keeping in view his permanent relation to the infinite life. For that he was to bring his animal personality under the submission of reason, cultivate love in heart, and work for the welfare of all. Co-extensive to his defining of life was his definition of religion, which consisted in man having a relation to the eternal life and to God in accordance with reason and contemporary know-

ledge. According to his explanation of life and religion though God might have any form, which was not to be disputed, but it was granted that He existed and life and religion explained with reference to Him. Though his argument on life and religion would be complete even if we took away God, as was explained in life and religion 4 (later phase) chapter, nevertheless, God was there as the ultimate source of all, the know-all and the end-all. His presence was there to culminate the final human reach, and from Him was to emanate the very spiritual conception. To the best of his understanding Tolstoy tried to explain the meaning of life and religion; what was incomprehensible and impenetrable he left to God.

His attitude to God may be summed up according to an entry made by him in his diary in the early period of his life but which remained true in the later period as well. He wrote:

Am unable to prove to myself the existence of God, or even to find any convincing evidence of it. Nor do I think the conception absolutely necessary. It is easier and simpler to imagine the eternal existence of the universe with its inconceivably admirable order, than to imagine the existence of a creator of it. The craving of man's body and spirit for happiness is the only path to an understanding of the mysteries of life.
When the craving of the spirit conflicts with the craving of the flesh, the former should take control; for the spirit is immortal, like the happiness it procures. The attainment of happiness is the means of its development....I do not understand the necessity of God's existence, but I believe in Him, and pray for help to understand Him.

That was in general Tolstoy's philosophy of life and his understanding of God with reference to that.

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1 As quoted in Derrick Leon, *Tolstoy*, p. 33.