VLADIMIR SOLOV'EV'S THREE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT WAR, PROGRESS AND THE END OF HISTORY

Ross Chambers

In 1899-1900 Vladimir Solov'ev published Tri razgovora o voene, progresse i kontse vsemirnom istorii (Three Conversations on War, Progress and the End of World History). The book was the philosopher's final comment on a problem with which he had been concerned throughout his life, the relationship between Christianity and social progress. 'Progress' as seen by many in the nineteenth century was an inexorable process which, if not exactly impersonal in that the sources of progress lay within human nature, was at least beyond the control of individuals. Such a view attracted criticism from religious thinkers intent on defending the morally autonomous individual. Tri razgovora contained a proposal for reconciling these positions. It is with this proposal that this paper is concerned.

Tri razgovora first appeared as a series of articles. When it was published as a book Solov'ev attached to it as a foreword a small piece which had originally been published in a newspaper under the title O poddel'nom dobre (On the counterfeit good). In this Solov'ev commented on the purpose and form of Tri razgovora. The central issue addressed in the book was,

is evil only a natural incompleteness, an imperfection disappearing of itself with the growth of the good, or is it a real force which by means of temptations has command over our world so that for the successful struggle against it, it is necessary to have a point of support in a different order of existence.

O poddel'nom dobre went on to say that Tri razgovora was neither a sermon nor a work of scientific philosophy. It was an attempt to state an aspect of Christian truth which had been lost sight of 'in recent times'. Solov'ev singled out Tolstoy's views as characteristic of this latter development. Tolstoy was so selective in his approach to Christian truths that it was 'fraudulent' for him to claim that his worldview was Christian.
Tri razgovora is in the form of three conversations, modelled on Platonic dialogues -- Solov'ev became in the 'nineties the major Russian translator of Plato -- but it also owes something to Solov'ev's penchant for comic sketches. On the Mediterranean coast near Monte Carlo a group of Russians meet and fall into discussion. The conversations concentrate in turn on the meaning of war, the nature of progress and the end of history. Through these issues they raise the question of the nature of evil and the best means for struggling with it. The sequence of conversations culminates with Mr Z, described in the foreword as the spokesman for Solov'ev, reading 'A Short Tale about AntiChrist' attributed to an Orthodox monk Pansophlus. This concerns the future development of history. It ends with the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead.

There are five participants in the conversations: the Prince, a Tolstoyan; a society woman whose role combines elements of jester and holy fool; and three men who represent, according to the foreword, different views about overcoming evil. They are the General who represents the commonsense religious view on resistance to evil; the Politician who represents the progressive view on this question; and Mr Z, who is described as representing the 'unconditionally religious' view of it. They exemplify the views of the past, present and the future respectively.

The first conversation is about war. It is about the ethical questions raised by killing and, particularly, the Tolstoyan doctrine of non-resistance to evil with force. Does the Russian army really deserve to be called 'Christ loving and worthy of honour' ('Khristollublivnoe i dostoslavnoe'), a traditional designation of the Russian army? The discussion covers standard arguments on this question, in particular the issue of responsibility to a third party. If rampaging Bashl-Bazouks are wiping out defenceless Armenian villages, isn't the intervention of the Russian army just and good? The Prince's claim that somehow non-resistance with force might work in these circumstances is held up to ridicule, and it is suggested that the Prince holds a naively optimistic view of human nature. Because evil must be struggled against, the necessary means for this, even killing, can, under certain circumstances, be considered good. A 'Christ loving' army can exist. The Politician,
however, raises the question of whether such an army will always be necessary. In his view better diplomacy and the spread of civilization will make armies obsolete.\(^7\)

The second conversation is dominated by the politician and deals with major features of nineteenth century liberal visions of progress. According to the Politician, war, disorder and evil decline with the growth of the state based on law and of 'politeness'.\(^8\) By politeness he means that minimum of morality which allows peace and harmony to reign in society. The development of politeness is part of the development of culture. It is supported by the development of the state. The latter promotes order and allows civilization to flourish. War, therefore, is conditionally good in that it facilitated the building of states. Now that a state system is firmly in place war is not necessary. Diplomacy coupled with the spread of culture, that is European culture, takes its place. At this point the Politician exposes his position by talking about the Eastern question. Russia, he claims, should respect all states. Thus, it should not support rebellions in Turkey. Russia should promote culture in Turkey as the Germans are doing. Religious matters such as differences between Christianity and Islam should be of no concern.\(^9\)

The Politician, then, defends a liberal vision of progress centred on education and the state based on law. Mr Z makes two criticisms of this position.\(^10\) They echo arguments which Solov'ev had made throughout his life. First, Mr Z points out that politeness is at best only a minimum of morality. It is not 'positive benevolence'. It is concerned principally with preventing harm, but morality must involve a commitment to the welfare of others and a vision of what constitutes a good society which goes beyond that of mere politeness. Secondly, Mr Z points out that liberal politics is based on the autonomy of the state. Thus, while the problem of internal order may be solved, the problem of order in relations between states is not. Will a system of states be able to end war? In the discussion, this question leads to a clarification of the Politician's position. He and Mr Z reach agreement that a world state will develop which will bring peace, social justice and enlightenment on an international scale. Both the Politician and Mr Z accept that such a development, the product
of growing European unity and the spread of European culture, is inevitable. The first criticism, however, is left unanswered. Mr Z returns to it, and develops it further, in the 'Short Tale about AntiChrist'.

The third conversation deals with the end of history and AntiChrist. It is dominated by Mr Z who strongly criticises the views of the Politician and the Tolstoyan Prince, claiming that these views herald the appearance of AntiChrist. Mr Z develops his argument around two quotations. The first is taken from Turgenev's novel, Dym (Smoke): 'Progress is a symptom.' In the novel this refers to the 'anthropological principle' according to which history is the self-realisation of human nature. For Mr Z progress is an indication of the reality of the good and of the fact that the good is justifying itself in history. This leads Mr Z to make a major contrast between his views and those who maintain Tolstoyan and other secular views of progress. The latter talk about progress but have no hope in the ultimate triumph of the good. This is because they cannot interpret death in terms of the good. Their unwillingness to believe in the resurrection (or something equivalent) shows that they lack faith in the ultimate power of the good as the basis of being.

The second quotation is taken from the Gospels: 'You must not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace but a sword.' (Matthew 10:34). It is vital, claims Mr Z, to distinguish true and false peace. A peace based on indifference to what is good is a false peace. This means that the realisation of the good for which Christ stands must, in some way, involve human choice. It cannot simply be accepted as what is, but must be chosen. Without such choice what comes into existence will not be the good. Yet, this point is made in the context of the idea of an inexorable progress, the results of which bear, at the least, a close resemblance to the realisation of the good. Mr Z reconciles these ideas by arguing that progress is only potentially good. It does not make human choice unnecessary. It allows the good to be realised but the good must still be chosen. If this is so, then progress, even or especially in its final stages, can be a deception or fraud. The results of progress can be mistaken for the good itself. In fact, argues Mr Z, they do not preclude an evil choice.
In the next stage of the book Mr Z recounts 'A Short Tale about AntiChrist'. Through this he argues that the distinction between the true and false good is to be found, in the first place, in attitudes towards Christ. The true good means life lived under the Lordship of Christ and an understanding of progress in His terms. The false good manifests itself in rejection of Christ.

The story may be summarised as follows. As a result of world historical events a world order embodying progressive ideals comes into being. There is peace, social justice and enlightenment. The central figure in this process is a 'superman', who believes in the Good and in God but loves only himself. He is the author of a book, The Open Way to Universal Peace and Prosperity, which has guided the creation of this new world. It does not mention Christ. He is eventually proclaimed autocratic emperor of the earth. In his rule he does not draw distinctions between good and bad people but rewards all equally. He brings peace by meeting human needs and by effecting compromises on difficult religious and philosophical questions. He establishes an 'equality of general repletion'.

The emperor claims to be doing God's will. Most Christians gladly accept this claim. At the emperor's instigation these unite in a 'universal' church. Not all Christians, however, accept these developments. A remnant, drawn from all churches, refuse to recognise the emperor's leadership or his church because he will not acknowledge Christ as his Lord. This leads both to the union of the remnant in one church and to the final historical conflict in which the emperor's motives are revealed as a desire for his own power and glory. Mr Z takes pains to stress that this is not because he does not believe in God, but because he is in rebellion against God. Progress in thought had not led to ignorance of God, but rather to the overcoming of materialism. In the final conflict the emperor is revealed as the servant of AntiChrist. The appearance of AntiChrist heralds the return of Christ. With the aid of the faithful remnant Christ defeats the forces of AntiChrist and establishes His Kingdom. This is accompanied by the resurrection of the dead.
In the story Solov'ev presented an account of evil in which evil came to resemble the good. The emperor claimed to be carrying out the work of Christ; AntiChrist appeared as a benefactor of humanity. This raises several questions. What is the difference between the true and false good? Why, if progress inexorably brings peace and plenty, does humanity continue to need Christ? Christ may have been necessary as part of the historical process, but why does he continue to be necessary?

The answer is that the world over which the emperor presided was, from the point of view of the good, incomplete. It had come into being on the basis of rational and pragmatic considerations, which found their fullest expression in the universal state. Humanity had solved its problems at the levels of material life and social relations defined by law. It had achieved unity, peace, harmony and plenty at these levels. It had not, however, achieved spiritual unity. Unity among the churches did not exist. The emperor, with the support of most church members, had created a union of the churches, but this had not been wholly successful. Moreover, it had been achieved by treating the consciences of church members and the truths about which they argued with indifference. This precipitated the final conflict and the return of Christ.

To understand fully Solov'ev's argument here, it is necessary to consider further his view of the relationship between law and morality. Unlike critics of law such as Tolstoy and unlike some nineteenth century legal philosophers, Solov'ev did not believe that law and morality were completely distinct. Law was an attempt to express a 'minimum of morality'. The history of law was the history of its developing approximation to this. The minimum of morality to which law gave expression was rational morality. Hence law was based on the defence of the right of self-determination of the rational subject. This meant that law rested on a concept of self-interest, even when the subject acknowledged the self-interest of others as of equal value. Yet, while defending this connection between law and morality, Solov'ev drew a distinction between law and Christian love. The latter demanded care for others to the point of sacrificing one's own interests. Law and rational morality need not be in conflict with Christian love, but they must not be confused with it. In particular, law could not, by itself, create a society which gave expression to love.18
The world the emperor rules represents the fullest development of law when separated from love. It is a world in which self-interested struggle between individuals has been overcome. It is a world characterised by the recognition -- on rational and pragmatic grounds -- of the moral rule that each person be treated as an 'end in himself'. The state created by the emperor does this by seeking to reconcile the interests of all, and by providing the material well-being necessary for a person to be an 'end'. Yet the state achieves this by being indifferent to the motives of people, that is, as mentioned, to whether they are good or bad people. As events unfold the state is shown to be based on self-interest. The emperor, the cornerstone of the whole system, is shown to be motivated by self-assertion and the desire for power.

The emperor, however, claims to have based his actions on Christ's teachings. It is a claim which many Christians accept. All acknowledge love as the supreme expression of the good. Yet the emperor and his supporters separate Christ's teaching from His person, and reject or ignore the latter. For them, in fact, love has become law. As such it involves no self-denyal. It is an expression of human self-assertion. Thus, the world ruled by the emperor is a society which is not based on love. Despite the human achievement and progress which it represents, it is not the Kingdom of God. This is because, as the emperor's attempt at creating religious unity shows, Christ has no part in it. Only in unity with Christ is the Kingdom of God realised. As Evgeny Trubetskoi has written of this aspect of Solov'ev's thought, 'It was necessary to possess Christ, i.e. to be united with Him in an immediate, living and personal relationship. Nothing short of this unity can make love real in human lives. Christ does not simply offer humanity moral teachings. He is the good. The good can be realised only in union with Him. The difference between the true and false good is revealed dramatically in their consequences. The triumph of the true good, the reign of Christ, is accompanied by resurrection. In the face of the ultimate evil, death, the false good is powerless.

An interesting feature of *Tri razgovora* is Solov'ev's treatment of the related issues of Tolstoyanism and the role of the state and law. In the first two conversations the state based on law, which resists evil with
force, is identified with the good, whilst Tolstoyan non-resistance is seen as leading to the appearance of AntiChrist. In the third conversation and the 'Short Tale about AntiChrist', however, the state based on law becomes the kingdom of AntiChrist. Solov'ev is able to identify both Tolstoyanism and the world of the emperor with AntiChrist because, he believes, they have much in common. Both claim to be doing Christ's work, yet both deny Christ Himself. The emperor puts himself before Christ, while Tolstoyanism denies the divinity of Christ and gives His teachings priority over His person. In denying the divine nature of Christ Tolstoy had prepared the way for AntiChrist, for not to believe in the divinity of Christ and the resurrection of the dead is to believe in the 'kingdom of this world'. Solov'ev had commented to Tolstoy in a letter in 1894, 'All our disagreement can be summed up in one concrete point — the resurrection of Christ.'

In denying the divine nature in Christ, both the emperor and the Tolstoyans distort the human. By taking Christ and His teachings to be human, Tolstoy denies the contribution to the realisation of the good of what Solov'ev regards as the genuinely human means for the struggle with evil. This was particularly true of social and economic life where Tolstoy rejects the state based on law, the means for the achievement of peace and well-being in these spheres. Tolstoy, according to Solov'ev, had shown himself unable to appreciate the complex processes of social life and thus had been unable to place the moral demands of Christ within the context of these processes. Indeed, Tolstoy's approach ignores the fact that in social life progress towards the establishment of good ends, peace, harmony, and well-being is really taking place. The emperor, in contrast to Tolstoy, denied the necessity of going beyond the results of human progress. He presented these to humanity as 'the good'. In his hands, however, that which had played the central role in human progress towards the realisation of the good, the state based on law, became AntiChristian. Human progress is thus shown to be not good in itself, but a conditional good. It must be subject to Christ.

A central feature of Три разговора, then, was Solov'ev's discussion of the significance, in terms of the good, of social processes. He rejects both Tolstoy's repudiation of such processes and the emperor's claim that they are good in themselves. Underlying this discussion is an insistence
that the good has to be realised as a good society, a Kingdom of God. The good must involve meeting the needs of individuals and the existence of conditions which would allow self-realisation. Both require collective action and a recognition of mutual dependence. Individuals could not secure their needs or the conditions for their self-realisation by themselves. Moreover, if such ends are to be secured for all, social organisation of a high degree would be necessary. Solov'ev was convinced that the social processes of human history, the growth of the state, the organisation of economic life, the development of the church as the organisation of religious life, were part of the realisation of these ends.

Yet, the social processes of human development presented certain problems. Solov'ev shared the widespread conviction that these processes were superpersonal and inexorable. They were products of human interaction and self-expression, but they were not under the control of any individual. In such circumstances, was any scope left for the actions of the morally autonomous individual? Was the good to be realised in history regardless of individual choices? One answer to these questions might be that there remained to the individual the ability to freely accept or reject these processes. Solov'ev made little of such an answer. History showed the acceptance of the processes to be natural and inevitable. They were, after all, solutions to important human problems.

In Tri razgovora Solov'ev proposed the reconciliation of contemporary notions of social process and the moral autonomy of the individual by arguing that the social processes of human development, although they are necessary for the realisation of the good, are not good in themselves. They could be the outcome of an enlightened self-interest as much as a Christ-like love. The emperor's kingdom and the kingdom of Christ are equally well served by them. Thus, one of the central arguments of Tri razgovora was that it is not possible to distinguish the motives behind such development until they reach their final stages. Social progress does not necessarily represent a choice for Christ.

The final stages of the world historical process present humanity with a choice regarding Christ in a uniquely clear and forceful way. To choose Christ is not to choose peace or well-being in society. There are compelling reasons in human nature for such choices and by the end of
history they have found expression in social organisation, regardless of people's attitudes to Christ. To choose Christ is not even simply a matter of choosing His teachings. Even those who deny Christ can accept His teaching. To choose Christ is to choose Him for His own sake. It is to choose self-denial at a time when human achievements give every reason for confidence in human powers. Not even the hope of resurrection impinges on this choice. Those, such as the emperor, who deny Christ in the final days, hope to achieve resurrection by virtue of their own powers.

One of the noteworthy features of Tri razgovora was that Solov'ev applied his arguments concerning social processes to the social process of religious life, the development of the church. In the 'Short Tale about AntiChrist' the churches which exist as history nears its end are not false churches. In them God can still be known and Christ can still be chosen. The faithful remnant which resists AntiChrist is drawn from Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant churches. More importantly, through them knowledge of God has become widespread. As mentioned earlier, the emperor's actions are not the result of ignorance of God. Moreover, the final stages of world history are marked by progress in the development of the churches. Through church reunion progress is made towards establishing a universal church. Yet the church which develops with the support of the emperor and most Christians is indifferent to Christ. It is central to the creation of a society in which love has become confused with law. Thus, even progress in the knowledge of God and in the life of the church are not necessarily aspects of the realisation of the good. The career of the emperor shows why this can be so. He believes in God, and attempts to do His will, but loves himself, not God. Progress in religious life does not by itself bring the Kingdom of God. It does not compel people to choose Christ. The Kingdom of God when it comes, comes through Christ and those who love Him.

Notes

1. Tri razgovora first appeared in Knizhki Nedeli (October, November, 1899; January, February, 1900) under the title, 'Pod pal'mami. Tri razgovora o mirnykh i voennykh delakh'. In 1900 it was published in St Petersburg as a book. See V. S. Solov'ev, Sobranie Sochinenii (3rd edn.

2. See, for example, Owen Chadwick, The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century (Cambridge 1975), 189ff; and M. Mandelbaum, History, Man and Reason. A Study in Nineteenth Century Thought (Baltimore 1971), 41ff.

In Russia Dostoevsky's work represents the most notable instance of the discussion of these issues. (See Gessen, 'Bor'ba utopii', op. cit.). A good example of their discussion by an ecclesiastic is the work of A. F. Gusev, professor of apologetics at the Kazan ecclesiastical academy. See his 'Nравственность', kak uslovie istinnoi tsivilizatsii', Pravoslavnoe Obozrenie, 1874, I, II.


4. Ibid., X, 84ff.

5. For Solov'ev's work on Plato in the 'nineties see Sob. Soch., IX, 194ff; XII, 360ff, 496ff. For his comic sketches see Ibid. XII, 171ff.

6. Ibid., X, 87, 92.

7. Ibid., 93ff.

8. Ibid., 120ff, 155ff.

9. Ibid., 134ff, 140ff, 154.

10. Ibid., 121ff, 156ff, 145ff.


12. Ibid., 159.

13. This was the theme of Solov'ev's major work of the 'nineties, Opravdanie dobra, (Moscow 1897) (Sob.Soch. VIII).

18. On these Issues see *Opravdanie dobra*, op. cit., especially 85ff, 399ff and 447ff; *Smysl liubvi* (Sob. Soch. VII, 3ff) and *Pravo i nравственности* (Sob. Soch. VIII, 519ff).


20. On this see especially E. Trubetskoi, 'Spor Tolstogo i Solov'eva o государстве', in *O Religii L'va Tolstogo* (Moscow 1912).