

HENRY GEORGE AND LEO TOLSTOY

KINDRED SOULS

In 1881 two years after Henry George had published *Progress and Poverty* on the other side of the world in New York, the Tolstoy family moved from their Yasnaya Polyana country estate to Moscow largely to improve their growing children's access to formal education. Later in an autobiography, Countess Sonya Tolstoy wrote of the impact this move had on her husband writing, "Now that he was away from the country and nature, the impressions of town life, which he had forgotten, but which now came fresh to him, with its poverty on the one side and its luxury on the other, threw him into despondency". Tolstoy's wife's words chime with those of Henry George in his introduction to *Progress and Poverty* where he writes, "It is as though an immense wedge were being forced, not underneath society, but through it. Those who are above the point of separation are elevated, but those who are below are crushed down".

A year after arriving in Moscow, Leo Tolstoy volunteered to take part in the Moscow Census of 1882 which took place over three days that January. The census-takers were divided into teams and assigned to different districts with Tolstoy's group responsible for the very poor inner-city Khamovniki ward not far from the wealthier area where he lived. In addition to the number of people with their age and gender, data was also collected on where people lived, their occupation, income and even religious faith which was later compiled into various reports published by the City Printing House. Tolstoy did not wait for these official reports and wrote an account of his own titled, *On The Moscow Census* which appeared on the front page of a prominent city newspaper the night before he presented it at the city's Duma. The following extract from Tolstoy's essay gives a feel for both his deep emotional reaction to the abject poverty he encountered, and his fervent call for a resolution to the grave iniquity.

"Why can we not think and hope that the cells of our society will revive, and bring the organism to life? We do not know in whose power the cells are, but we know that life is in our power. We can manifest the light which is in us, or we can put it out. Let a man come at the end of the day to the Lyápinski night lodging-house

when one thousand insufficiently clad and hungry people are waiting in the cold to be let into the house, and let this one man try to help them, - his heart will bleed, and he will with despair and resentment at men run away from there; but let one thousand people come to those one thousand people with the desire to help them, and the work will be easy and pleasant. Let the mechanics invent a machine with which to lift the burden which is choking us, - that is good; but while they have not yet invented it, let us in foolish, peasant, Christian fashion heave in a mass, - maybe we can lift it. Heave, friends, all together!"

Sadly, neither Moscow's wealthier citizenry nor the City's Duma rose to the challenge, but Tolstoy refused to let the matter rest even though Sonya could see the burden of inequality weighing heavily on her husband's mind, heart and Soul. Over the next four years, Tolstoy continued to develop his thoughts on social and economic justice which came to fruition in his 1886 treatise, *What Then Must We Do?* also variously translated as *What To Do?*, or *What Is To Be Done?*. It was during this period that Tolstoy first encountered Henry George's work reading first *Social Problems*, then *Progress and Poverty* in 1885 with both books having a profound and enduring impact on him. Tolstoy's work draws its title from the question posed by the crowd to John the Baptist, "What then must we do?" if we are to find favour with God (Luke, Ch 3, vs 10) and then proceeds to reflect on Tolstoy's earlier experience of the 1882 Moscow Census. After setting the scene, Tolstoy considers the role of money, together with the division of labour and ownership of land, although at this stage not perfectly grasping George's Single Tax concept. Nevertheless, in Tolstoy's work, we read, "Henry George proposes to declare all land the property of the state, and to substitute a land-rent for all taxes, direct and indirect" which is quite a thought demonstrating the global reach of George's *Progress and Poverty* within a decade of its publication in 1879, bearing in mind the language gap too.

The similarities between George's *Progress and Poverty* and Tolstoy's *What Then Must We Do?* run deep with a strikingly similar religious moral vein running through both at first sight,

economic texts. George had been spurred by the deep prolonged recession in America from 1873-79 and Tolstoy by the Moscow Census with both men reacting strongly to the deep scourge of inequality blighting society. They each saw this through the prism of Christ's teachings, notably his Sermon on the Mount with its Lord's Prayer invoking his followers to strive for God's Kingdom, "On Earth, as it is in Heaven". Indeed, we recall George's rousing "Thy Kingdom Come" speech in Glasgow City Hall on Sunday 28th April 1889 in which he urged his listeners to believe in this possibility. A linguistic review of the two works might also prove instructive here using the number of occurrences of the word *Soul* as a measure of their religiosity for comparison with other well-known texts addressing the workings of the economy.

We find the word *Soul* 12 times in *Progress and Poverty* (1879) and 14 times in *What Then Must We Do?* (1886), whereas it is entirely absent from Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776), John Maynard Keynes' *The General Theory of Money* (1935) and Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2020). In fairness to Adam Smith, it does feature 4 times in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (4 Editions from 1759 to 1790) which should be seen as an essential ethical counter-balance to *Wealth of Nations*. Both George and Tolstoy were themselves kindred souls in seeing the importance of interweaving natural law with their discourse on economics, as evident from the two quotations below.

First George, "And so in society, as at present constituted, men are greedy of wealth because the conditions of distribution are so unjust that instead of each being sure of enough, many are certain to be condemned to want. It is the 'devil catch the hindmost' of present social adjustments that causes the race and scramble for wealth, in which all considerations of justice, mercy, religion and sentiment are trampled underfoot; in which men forget their own Souls and struggle to the very verge of the grave for what they cannot take beyond".

And Tolstoy, "Town life, which had seemed strange and foreign to me before, now became so repulsive that all the pleasures of the luxurious life I formerly enjoyed became a torment to me. And try as I would to find in my Soul some justification for our way of living, I could not without irritation behold either my own or any other drawing room, or any clean, elegantly laid table, or a carriage with well-fed coachmen and horses, or the shops, theatres and assemblies. I could not help seeing beside them the hungry, cold downtrodden inhabitants of Lyápin House. I could not escape the thought that these two things were connected and the one resulted from the other".

Whilst Tolstoy's *What Then Must We Do?* falls short of George's rigorous economic analysis in *Progress and Poverty*, Tolstoy shares his visceral rejection of gross material inequality grounded in Christian ethics. In January 1888, George quoted extracts from Tolstoy's *What Then Must We Do?* in a feature article for his weekly Single-Tax newspaper, *The Standard*, under the title, *Charity and Justice*, further revealing their commonality of thought.

George and Tolstoy started a written correspondence in 1891 and the letter from Tolstoy to George reproduced below which was penned in English during 1896 gives an idea of the warm relationship between the two men.

Moscow, 27 March, 1896

"Dear Sir,

The reception of your letter gave me a great joy, for it is a long time that I know you and love you. Though the paths we go by are different, I do not think that we differ in the foundation of our thoughts.

I was very glad to see you mention twice in your letter the life to come. There is nothing that widens so much the horizon, that gives such a firm support or such a clear view of things, as the consciousness that although it is but in this life that we have the possibility and duty to act, nevertheless this is not the whole of life, but that bit of it only which is open to our understanding.

I shall wait with great impatience for the appearance of your new book, which will contain the so much needed criticism of the orthodox political economy. The reading of every one of your books makes clear to me things which were not so before, and confirms me more and more in the truth and practicability of your system. Still more do I rejoice at the thought that I may possibly see you.

My Summer I invariably spend in the country near Tula.

*With sincere affection,
I am truly your friend,*

Leon Tolstoy."

The new book Tolstoy was referring to in the letter was George's *The Science of Political Economy* which was to be five volumes of which four were completed before his untimely death following a heart attack during the New York Mayoral election campaign in 1897. Sadly, this also meant that the meeting between the two men being mooted at the end of the letter never took place. However, George's ideas were now firmly planted in Tolstoy's mind, heart and Soul as expressed in his last novel, *Resurrection*, completed in 1899 and in his essay, *A Great Iniquity*, which lauded George's solution to the 'Land Question'. The latter was published by *The Times of London* on Tuesday 1st August 1905 and subsequently expanded by Tolstoy into a book-length essay published under the same title. During his final years, Tolstoy included extracts from George's works in his series of Calendar Books, or wise sayings for every day, including the following quotation:

"The poor ye have always with you" If ever a scripture has been wrested to the devil's service, this is that scripture.

This extract was from George's *Social Problems* (1883) and underlines the religious underpinning of his work which was so much at one with Tolstoy's view of the world.

Whilst the cruel turn of fate prevented George from visiting Tolstoy in Russia, his son, Henry George junior, did manage to visit the now eighty-year-old Tolstoy at his Yasnaya Polyana home near Tula in June 1909. The following moving account which appeared in the English Daily Chronicle records his account of the meeting:



Mr George states that age evidently has placed its hand heavily on the great master, yet he appeared not so feeble as delicate. The eyes revealed the keen, buoyant spirit within. As one of the ornaments of Tolstoy's study, Mr George noticed his father's portrait holding a place of honour on the wall. "He was my friend", said the great writer. Tolstoy talked of death. He did not expect to live much longer. "Tomorrow I die," he said with a sweet smile. "Meanwhile I have another book to write". Asked what the book was about, he said it treated of moral questions, and not of political economy.

This led him to talk of Henry George's teachings, and he handed Mr George a manuscript giving his ideas on the social, governmental and the revolutionary conditions in Russia today, as well as showing the vigour and hope lighting up the wonderful old man's mind. In the manuscript was this remark: "The land question is, indeed, the question of the deliverance of mankind from slavery produced by the private ownership of land". Among the numerous questions touched by Mr George was England's concern about national defence. "Navies," said the Sage, "are not necessary to people who desire to be at peace, but only to people who wish to rob and murder. All this building of warships is a sign that people who have power are preparing to go off on new expeditions to rob and murder".

Another side of this wonderful old man was exhibited when Mr George asked what he thought of his own novels. "I believe I have forgotten what they were about", was the answer. "Then", said Mr George, "I can promise you a great treat if you will read them". The day was closed with melody, Tolstoy listening to the subdued notes of the Russian guitar. His comments revealed in the old man of 81 the active spirit of the poetry and romance that had created his great novels. When Mr George was leaving Tolstoy said: "This is the last time I shall meet you, I shall see your father soon. Is there any commission you would have me take him?". "Tell him the work is going on," said Mr George. Tolstoy nodded, and Mr George departed feeling, as he says, that he had been privileged to talk to the greatest man on earth.

Tolstoy died the year after Henry George junior's visit and his passing from this life was marked by echoes of the display of public warmth towards George thirteen years earlier when an estimated 100,000 or more mourners lined the streets of New York for his funeral procession. Similarly, thousands of mourners flocked to Tolstoy's burial at Yasnaya Polyana, despite the authority's refusal to put on more trains from Moscow. Both George and Tolstoy were courageous crusaders against social injustice and inequality and clearly deeply appreciated by the people whose lives they sought to improve through their writings. They were indeed kindred Souls with a shared commitment to help remake *God's Kingdom, On Earth as it is in Heaven*. One would imagine that more than a century after their passing, both George and Tolstoy would be heartened that their important unfinished work is still going on. 🇺🇸