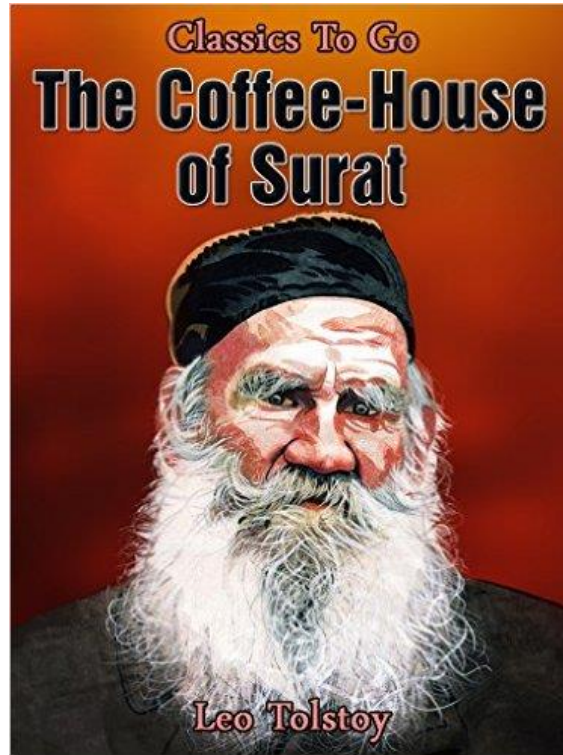


**Religious Exclusivism and Quest for God in Leo Tolstoy's
*The Coffee House of Surat***

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Abstract

It has been normally perceived that there is a creator for all living beings and it is evident that the superior power of divinity should not be ignored. Man has been believing in God, thinking He could rescue him out of the calamities of earth. But, Charles Darwin and his ideologies about evolution have put a religious man in a state of despondency and desperation to go on a quest for God and find him as soon as possible, before his demise. The causalities of the Second World War have entrenched in human's mind the long lasting question whether there is really someone to save him or her from all of this world's troubles. Religion has been trying all along to answer this question in its own way and fashion. This has evoked religious exclusivism which says that one's God is the true God and this position may not be accepted by others. Leo

Tolstoy tried to find the answer about God in order to evade the existentialism found in one's life and employ meaning into it. Leo Tolstoy's ideologies are unique as he does not want to speak about the ecstasy which can be found in Heaven or afterlife, but he speaks of the one to be found right here on earth.

Key words: Religion, God, existentialism, Leo Tolstoy, religious exclusivism, Coffee House in Surat

Inculcating the Idea of God

Leo Tolstoy has managed to inculcate the idea of God through his writings like that of *A Confession* and *Resurrection*. The story narrated in *The Coffee House of Surat* speaks about the various opinions staged by various individuals of various ethnicity and religious backgrounds and tries to provide, from the point of view of Leo Tolstoy, an ultimate answer through the story when asked about God. Tolstoy unifies God with faith of one's own and the evident need to tell the truth. Tolstoy chooses the ambience of a Coffee House for this story carefully, as it is an ideal place for a debate and a final answer.

A Theologian as the Initial Visitor

“One day a learned Persian theologian visited this coffee house. He was a man who has spent his life studying the nature of the Deity, and reading and writing books upon the subject. He has thought, read, and written so much about God, that eventually he lost his wits, became quite confused, and ceased even to believe in the existence of God.” (TKSAOS-198)

The initial visitor to the coffee house was a theologian. Evidently it naturally means he is learned and scholarly and tends to find lot of answers to questions which life has asked him.

Among those questions is the vital one about the existence of God. Out of his education he has somehow checked himself in believing in the existence of God, which has exiled him from his country. Instead of understanding the idea of reasoning the theologian has concluded by himself that there is no reasoning or control over God, or nature, or universe.

The Dialogue

This theologian had an African slave who was used to start the conversation leading to the existence of God.

“‘Tell me, wretched slave’ said he, do you think there is God, or not? ‘Of course there is,’ said the slave, and immediately drew from under his girdle a small idol of wood. ‘There,’ said he, everyone in our country worships the fetish tree, from the wood of which this God was made’”. (TKSAOS-198)

The Theologian asks his slave about the existence of God for which the answer of the slave is positive. The slave shows the theologian a piece of wood and says that it is God. This conversation was heard by various people and religious exclusivism started its pace.

Discourse with Religious Exclusivists

The first one to start the debate was a Brahmin from India. His answer to God is that the only God is Brahma. He wanted to convince everyone that Brahma is the true God. “Miserable fool! Is it possible you believe that God can be carried under a man's girdle? There is one God- Brahma, and he is greater than this whole world, for he created it”. (TKSAOS-199)

This was not a convincing argument for the Jew who was also an attendee. He argued that the true abode of God is not India but Israel. He argued that the true God is not the God of Brahmins but that of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He argued that one day Israel will be the ruler of the whole world. “The true God is not the God of Brahmins, but of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. With the temple of Jerusalem - the wonder of ancient world - restored to its splendour, shall Israel be established a ruler over all nations”. (TKSAOS-199, 200)

A Roman Catholic argued that the statement of the Jew is negative as he argued in Italian that God is present in Rome and he said that God does not have preference or prejudice for a nation, rather he expects everyone to shelter under the wings of the Catholic Church where salvation is found. “God shows preference to no nation, but calls all who wish to be saved to the

bosom of the Catholic Church of Rome, the one outside whose borders no salvation can be found”. (TKSAOS-200)

“How can you say that salvation belongs to your religion? Those only will be saved, who serve God according to the Gospel, in spirit and in truth, as bidden by the word of Christ.” (TKSAOS-200) Naturally the Catholic was opposed by a Protestant. His argument was that the salvation quoted by the Catholic was not the true aspect, but true salvation can be found only in Christ. We can see the exclusivism of Christianity just as the Hindu Brahmin has also claimed Brahma as the Creator God; and even evidently we can see the differences of opinion in one religion just as in all religions there are many schisms. This again strengthens the ambiguity of God and His true existence.

“Your belief in your Roman religion is vain,' said he', it was superseded twelve hundred years ago by the true faith: that of Mohammed! You cannot but observe how the true Mohammedan faith continues to spread both in Europe and Asia, and even in the enlightened country of China. You say yourselves that God has rejected the Jews: and as a proof, you quote the fact that the Jews are humiliated and their faith does not spread”. (TKSAOS-200)

The second largest religion Islam does not spare its absence in the debate, as a Muslim strongly objects the presence of other religions except Islam. He is confident and comfortable that his religion of Islam has spread its roots in various parts of the world including highly populated Europe, Asia and China. He argues that his religion is a vintage one and has preceded another major religion of the world, Christianity. He even brings up the anti-Semitism experienced by Jews especially at the hands of Christians.

Other Groups also Participate in Discussion

This debate about God reaches its heights as everyone in the coffeehouse turns to argue about their points on their religion. There were lots of them like Abyssinian Christians, Llamas from Tibet, Muslims and Fire-Worshippers. There was a massive Religious Exclusivism as everyone tried to make their point. Everyone was shouting in this commotion except a Chinaman who was silent. He was asked to give his opinion. The Chinaman tries to explain God. His

explanation is through a story where a man who was gazing at the bright Sun eventually became quite blind because of the massive light of the Sun. This blind man eventually comes to a conclusion that the sun does not exist.

The story does not conclude as the Chinaman continued. He convinced everyone that the blind man was enlightened by a slave. The slave who was with the blind man argued that, he does not want to see the sun but he wants only the light with which he can help himself and find some purpose.

“So on matters of faith, continued the Chinaman the student of Confucius, ‘it is pride that causes error and discord among men. As with the sun, so it is with God. Each man wants to have a special God of his own, or at least a special God for his native land. Each nation wishes to confine in its own temples Him, whom the world cannot contain.’”

To Conclude

Tolstoy seems to prefer religious pluralism, but, in the process, the story somehow elevates Confucian thought and approach as something closer to truth. Deeper analysis of Confucian thought is now left to the reader to form his or her own assessment.

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