Tolstoy and Mormonism

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Although Tolstoy is remembered today as a great novelist, short story writer and dramatist — the Russians consider him to be nearly as significant as Shakespeare in world literature — he would no doubt prefer to be remembered as a thinker, social reformer, and preceptor of morality. After an excruciating crisis in his middle years he became preoccupied with religious and moral questions at the expense of literature, much to the regret of his fellow authors, his readers, and most of his family, devoting his astonishing energy (how was it possible for one man to write 7000 letters in his lifetime?) to reading, thought, and writing on the burning ethical, social, and particularly religious issues of his day.

One of the characteristics of Tolstoy's thought in his later years, when he was convinced that his mission lay in the moral conversion of mankind, was a profound commitment to religious belief. Tolstoy was convinced, quite simply, that to live was to believe. He accepted the existence of God, and, indeed, without the surety of God's presence, he says, he would have shot himself in the birch woods on his estate or hanged himself in his study; the existence of God justified his own existence. What is more, he believed that God is accessible to all men of all social classes and all races and the celebration of His presence might take many forms. Although Tolstoy was officially a member of the Russian Orthodox Church (his status after his so-called excommunication was ambiguous) he had a consuming curiosity about religious practices in India, China, Europe, and the New World. The inquiring reader will find discussions on the beliefs of Jains, Quakers, Russian Old Believers, Buddhists, and American Protestants in many different shapes and forms in his later works, as well as on many doctrinal matters. He brought to the study of comparative religion his indefatigable energy, clarity of vision, and tolerance, which is reflected in the thousands of pages he wrote on various religious questions in the latter years of his life, defending always the right of free religious inquiry. An example of his toleration and courage was his concern for the Jews in Russia. He defended the persecuted Jewish minority in Russia with compassion and he was without a shred of the bigotry which

mars the works of many Russian writers, such as Dostoyevsky. For his tolerance Count Tolstoy was idolized by the young Jews of Russia before the revolution.

But at the same time that Tolstoy was consumed by an intense curiosity about different religious beliefs around the world and genuinely sympathetic to religious commitment, his concern above all was for personal, individual belief. What he sought was religious belief which was obtained in anguish and expressed in the life of the believer as altruism, hope, resignation to pain and suffering, and the courage to face death. Religion was an intensely personal experience. He himself had undergone a wrenching conversion after an ordeal of study and introspection and it had changed his life. He hoped as much for others and he used all his powers of persuasion to help his fellow men to find a path to a true, living, personal religion. But such a goal could be reached by many different routes, and certainly such a religious commitment need not be made within the framework of any organized church; just as he had found his way alone, so could others. Indeed, a real religious life could better be found outside an organized religion with its cathedrals, ritual, dogma, and above all, subordination to authority. In the later years of his life, Tolstoy was to the soles of the peasant boots he wore opposed to institutionalized religion. He wrote at length in his books *My Religion* and *My Confession* of his aversion to official churches. He could never, for example, accept the idea of the sacrament — this was an affront to his intelligence — nor the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church, nor the whole system of authority upon which an organized church rests.

How was it possible for a man to be deeply committed to the existence of God and at the same time be opposed to a church? Tolstoy saw no paradox here, for his rejection of an organized church was consistent with his idea that the justification of religious belief lay in its efficacy at a personal level. The trappings of a church, the whole system which grows up as an excrescence on personal belief, are not necessary, he believed, and in some cases, as in Russia where the church was an arm of the state, the church may become despotic, vindictive, and opposed to those principles of personal belief which Tolstoy held to be the essence of religion, because they are a threat to the structure and tradition of the official church. The measure of the religious belief is the individual. Tolstoy was accused by his enemies of being an anarchist, and after the revolution it became a commonplace among Russian emigré circles to say that Tolstoy's refusal to accept institutional authority — whether it was the state or organized religion — was one of the forces which undermined Czarist Russia. Perhaps this is so. To this charge Tolstoy would have answered, like Luther before him, that he could do no other. For him, the ultimate confrontation was the individual, naked before his God, confident of His benign love.

In his long quest for religious truth wherever he might find it, Tolstoy became acquainted with Mormonism. In fact he first mentions the subject in his diary when he was still a young writer unknown outside Russia, traveling in Western Europe in 1857. After this brief encounter his interest in the Church was renewed by a correspondence which his daughter at his instigation maintained in 1888-1889 with Susa Young Gates, which also found reflection in his diary. He wrote briefly again on the subject of Mormonism

in an essay published towards the end of his life in 1901. In addition to these sources we also have recorded interviews with Tolstoy made by two prominent American reporters; in these cases the opinions of Tolstoy are filtered through their minds and lips. All of these materials are, unfortunately, fragmentary and the correspondence between Tolstoy's daughter and Mrs. Gates has been preserved only on one side (the Russian archivists were more conscientious in preserving the Tolstoy correspondence than was the daughter of Brigham Young), but nonetheless there is sufficient material available to reconstruct with some certainty Tolstoy's attitude towards Mormonism, an attitude which is, I believe, consistent with his general attitude towards religion.

In the second part of this essay I would like to examine briefly the sequel to this story which developed in Utah for the most part after the death of Tolstoy. But this sequel, as interesting as it is, is subordinate to my central concern: to explore the effect Mormonism had on one of the great and original thinkers of our time.[1]

I

Tolstoy was 28 years of age, a bachelor, a Count, a retired army officer, a veteran of skirmishes in the Caucasus and a real war in the Crimea, and the absolute owner of an estate and hundreds of serfs, when he made his first trip to Western Europe in 1857. He was also somewhat more than famous in his native Russia because of the stories he had written, stories in which he drew from his childhood, his skeptical observations of men at war, and his baffling experiences with his serfs, who persisted in regarding him as a master and despot, and not as the good-hearted patron he knew himself to be. But he was unknown outside of Russia — his world-wide fame was to come in the next decades with the publication of his two great novels — and he was merely another Russian land-owner traveling through France, Germany, and Switzerland, visiting the great cities and historical monuments which he already knew well from his reading. He was comparatively at ease as he made his

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[1]To the best of my knowledge this subject has never been investigated adequately. The cryptic notes on the missionary whom Tolstoy met in Switzerland in 1857 are mentioned in Franz-Heinrich Philipp, *Tolstoi und der Protestantismus* (*Giessen*, 1959) p. 24; Aylmer Maude, the devoted English disciple of Tolstoy, describes Tolstoy's famous interview with Andrew D. White in his *Life of Tolstoy* (New York, 1911), II, p. 586; and Ernest J. Simmons in his biography, *Leo Tolstoy*, ([New York, 1960], II, p. 124), mentions the passage in Tolstoy's diary in which he describes his reaction to reading a biography of Joseph Smith; but none of these authors had any concern for the general question of Tolstoy and Mormonism. Research on the problem is needlessly complicated by the inadequate index which accompanies the great Jubilee Edition of Tolstoy's works in 94 volumes (cited henceforth as *Collected Works*) which is fundamental to any study of Tolstoy. And in addition, some of the materials central to the problem have never before appeared in print. These will be identified below at the appropriate places.

My search for materials which began in the Summer of 1969 took me to the University of California at Los Angeles, and to the very helpful staffs at the Utah History Room of the Salt Lake City Public Library, the Church Historian's office, Salt Lake City, and the Library of the Utah Historical Society. Finally, I wish to thank the staff of the Tolstoy Museum, Moscow, who kindly sent copies of the correspondence of Susa Young Gates to me.

All translations from the Russian are my own and all dates are given in New Style. Spellings and punctuation in quoted sources have been preserved as they appear in the original; emphases (italics) are those of the originals also.

I would also like to thank Karl Keller for his encouragement and assistance.

journey; at least his journals show little of that uneasy preoccupation with the question of Russia's relationship with the rest of Europe which has fascinated and repelled Russians for the last four hundred years. The languages of Western Europe presented no difficulties for him; like all upper-class Russians his education had been European and many of his tutors were Frenchmen or Germans who taught in their native language, and therefore he could give a good account of himself in French, German, and with somewhat more difficulty, English as well.

Therefore, no doubt, he had little difficulty conversing in one of these languages with a young man of about his own age whom he met in June or the end of May on a train in Switzerland and who probably communicated to him the first detailed information he had ever obtained about Mormonism. In his notebooks the fruits of that conversation were three English phrases, with three of the four words misspelled:

Utha.
Joss Smith
Linchlaw[2]

A few days later these brief notes were expanded in his native Russian with a curious admixture of French and English in the entry he made in his diary as he left Bern on the train for Freiburg:

> Left Bern. Flat country with fields of rye and woods as far as Freiburg. An American thirty years of age who has been in Russia. Marmons in Utha [in English], Joss Smith [in English] their founder, killed by Glinchlaw [in English] Hunting for Buffaloes [in French] and deer [in French].[3]

Who was this thirty-year-old American who had been in Russia and who was so knowledgeable about Mormonism? Probably a Mormon missionary, but Tolstoy never mentioned him by name, nor does he identify his profession. Did this young man have any idea that he was addressing a man who was to become probably the world's most famous novelist and a great moral force not only in Russia but everywhere that the printed word could reach?

From a few brief statements in his notebooks written four weeks later it appears that Tolstoy had an opportunity to hear something of Mormonism in Geneva, also from an unnamed individual:

Joseph Smith. Missionary in Geneva.[4]

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[2]*Collected Works,* XLVII, p. 210

[3]*Collected Works,* XLVII, p. 132. At this point the modern editors of Tolstoy's *Collected Works* provide an explanatory note which, while it is not immediately relevant, may be of interest to the American reader to indicate what some well educated Russians believe to be characteristic of Mormonism: "Mormons: An American religious sect, founded about 1830 by Joseph Smith, which is a colorful mixture of Biblical beliefs and fantastic inventions of the founder himself. One of the characteristic features of Mormonism was polygamy based on the example of the Biblical patriarchs. As a result a conflict arose between the local population and the leaders of the sect during which Joseph Smith was killed in June, 1844, by an enraged mob, without a trial according to Lynch law. Subsequently, the Mormons, under the leadership of Smith's successor, Brigham Young, emigrated to Indian territory, Utah, where on the shores of Great Salt Lake they founded a theocratic community "the Latter-day Saints" with an original internal organization; the community within a short time attained significant success, thanks to the industry, solidarity, and discipline of its members. When the Mormons settled in Utah, the territory was still wild, with herds of buffalo and deer, which the Indians and newly arrived settlers hunted." *Collected Works,* XLVII, p. 463.

[4]*Collected Works* XLVII, p. 212

But unfortunately Tolstoy never expanded on this incident, so that we know nothing of his reaction to the words he heard, and indeed this is true of all of these initial comments on Mormonism which date from these early years. His comments remain cryptic, without color or emotion, and tantalizing in their brevity.

The next recorded evidence we have of Tolstoy's interest in Mormonism is dated 1887, after a thirty-year interval. Those thirty years saw the writing of his novels, the begetting of a large family, the intense emotional crisis which led to Tolstoy's religious awakening, and the establishment of Tolstoy's fame.

It was to visit the famous author that George Kennan, the American journalist and student of Russian affairs, and father of the American diplomat, George F. Kennan, went to Yasnaya Polyana, Tolstoy's estate. Kennan spoke Russian well, had an extraordinary memory, knew many important people in Russia, including revolutionaries exiled to Siberia, and Tolstoy granted him a lengthy interview. During the course of this interview Tolstoy touched briefly on Mormonism, and his remarks are important not so much for what he said about Mormonism as for the sympathy which he expressed for Mormons as an oppressed and persecuted minority, for at the time Mormonism was suffering from majority displeasure more severely than at any time since Nauvoo; these were the years of the great anti-polygamy campaigns.

> In the course of further conversation he [Tolstoy] said he thought it deeply to be regretted that America had in two particulars proved false to her traditions.
>
> "In what particulars?" I inquired.
>
> "In the persecution of the Chinese and the Mormons," he replied. "You are crushing the Mormons by oppressive legislation, and you have forbidden Chinese immigration."
>
> "But," I said "have you ever heard what we have to say for ourselves upon these questions?"
>
> "Perhaps not," he answered, "tell me."
>
> I then proceeded to give him the most extreme anti-Chinese views that have ever prevailed upon the Pacific coast . . .[5]

But then, after this promising introduction, Kennan declined to pursue the Mormon question and apparently Tolstoy was given no more opportunity to clarify his views on the subject of Mormonism.

But this truncated interview was to have an unexpected effect, because a young wife living at the time in Honolulu read Kennan's article and initiated the most interesting episode in the entire question of Tolstoy's relationship to Mormonism. She was Susa Young Gates, wife of Elder Jacob F. Gates, and now remembered as the most talented child of Brigham Young.[6]

This is what she wrote:

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[5]George Kennan "A Visit to Count Tolstoi." *Century Magazine,* 34 (June 1887), 263.

[6]Susa Young Gates was a remarkably energetic writer, editor, publicist, and mother of 13 children. Those interested in following her career should read Paul Cracroft's unpublished Master's thesis: "Susa Young Gates: Her Life and Literary Career" (University of Utah, 1951). Mrs. Gates' personal papers are located for the most part at the Utah State Historical Society, with some valuable materials also available at the Church Historian's Office.

Honolulu. July 30th, '88

Count — Leo Tolstoi: —
Moscow: —

Dear Sir.

For many months I have wished to write to you, and yet have hesitated and allowed my fear to overcome my desire.

Very likely this may never reach you. In that case, you will neither be bothered by this letter nor be aware of the existence of one who has read much of, and admired more, the character of Russia's Man.

Alas for me, I have never been able to obtain any of your translated works, although I have seen numerous criticisms and comments thereon.

One year ago, in June '87, an article in the "Century," a leading American Magazine, gave an account of a visit to yourself and reports of the interview that followed.

It is needless to say that I was deeply interested in the same. Especially so when I read your remarks in relation to the present efforts of the U.S. Gov. to crush out polygamy among the peculiar sect called Mormons. My surprise was unbounded that extensive as your reading and knowledge is, it should still reach so far, and compass so *seemingly* small a factor in the world's present history.

I should like if I were only able, to give you a "mormon's" view of the Mormon question. But naturally, I shrink from intruding that upon you which might be entirely unwelcome.

You have doubtless heard "our story" all from the one side. Would you care for the "other side" to speak also?

It would please me to forward to your address a copy of that Book, so much maligned and abused, but withal so simple and sweet, called by our enemies "The Golden Bible" by ourselves "The Book of Mormon."

I would wish for one like yourself, standing on a far eminence, above men's passions and men's ambitions, to read this record of a people who once flourished and prospered in the new yet ancient land of America.

My own home is in Utah. I am here with my husband on what people term, "a mission." But, I love my home, my people, and my people's religion. And to the few abroad in the earth whose souls reach out for eternal love, eternal justice, and eternal truth, my heart turns with reverance and yearning.

It is with love and pride that I allude to the life and labors of my father, whose whole life was one solemn yet happy devotion to the uplifting and purifying of men and women, and whose name was Brigham Young.

If you shall feel interest enough in the matter to address me, you will gratify

A most Ardent Admirer

Address:
Susa Young Gates
Honolulu
Box 410
Oahu
Sandwich Islands[7]

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[7]The original copies of the three letters which Susa Young Gates wrote to Tolstoy are in the State Tolstoy Museum, Moscow. They have never before appeared in print. Photocopies of the letters are in the author's possession. The letters are printed verbatim, including misspellings and faulty punctuation.

Scrawled across the last page of the letter in Russian is the single word "Answer."

This letter was obviously carefully composed; the tone is one of repectful adulation, hopefully, no doubt, to ensure a favorable response. The style is measured and wrought, and the choice of words is sensitive and effective. It bears the mark of literary talent, and with a born writer's understanding of artful effect, Mrs. Gates saves her most telling point to the last — that she is the daughter of probably the best known Mormon of his century, leader of the Westward trek, and great American, Brigham Young.

Tolstoy never personally wrote an answer to Mrs. Gates, but, as was often his procedure, he instructed his daughter, Tatyana, to write to her. None of the letters (if indeed there was more than one) sent to Mrs. Gates have been preserved, nor, apparently, did the Tolstoys retain copies.

In response to what must have been a favorable letter from Tatyana Tolstoy, Susa Young Gates wrote a second letter a few months later. Note that the letter is addressed to Tatyana Tolstoy, which confirms the theory that Tolstoy did not respond personally to Mrs. Gates:

Honolulu. Oct 18th, 1888

Dear Madam —

Your letter came to me in this month's mail, and I hasten to reply by the returning steamer.

I have written by this mail to the publishers in Salt Lake City to forward to your father's address two books, one, the Book of Mormon, and the other "The Life of Joseph Smith." The latter is written by Hon. Geo. Q. Cannon one of our Twelve Apostles, and a man beloved by all our people. It will be found to contain an account of the manner in which the Book of Mormon was translated and obtained. I asked the publisher (who is an old friend,) to insert your father's name on the fly-leaf with an added signature of my name. I should like to have done this myself, but it was of course impossible. I trust they will reach you about the time this letter does.

And now let me thank your father for this priviledge he has granted me. I feel honored in presenting such books to such a man.

I scarcely know what information would best please your father. Historical, he will find much of our early history in the second book I have sent. It has occurred to me that some data as to the present strained situation of affairs in Utah might be acceptable to him. I only fear to over-burden him; if I can avoid that, then I shall be quite satisfied. We have many publications in our midst, the chief organ of our people being the Deseret News a daily and weekly paper. Would copies of this be of any interest? There is among us a paper published and edited by women, The Woman's Exponent. For you must know we are very progressive in our views on the Women Question, having advocated Woman Suffrage for years. I shall take liberty of enclosing to your address a copy of the News and Exponent, and if you care to have more of them or indeed of any other publications you need only say so, and I will order them sent.

I might say much myself, but I do not wish to weary you.

And now, being a young woman as I infer you are, it occurs to me that I live in the land of ferns rare and beautiful, mosses, and shells. Dear lady would you care to receive a few specimens such as can be sent in the mails, and what are your particular tastes? My own love for these things is inordinate, so I am always fancying perhaps my

sister-women albeit in far-away climes may enjoy and appreciate such things as well as I do.

Please forgive me if I have been too free being so complete a stranger, but indeed I cannot tell you how deep is my admiration and reverence for your father's noble life and its exalted principles. This it is which has made me so bold.

My home is in Utah, but have been sojourning here on these "Jewel Isles of the Pacific" for the last three years. Doubtless in the course of the next six or eight months we shall return to our home.

Of late I have had the pleasure of reading some of your father's sketches "The Seige of Sebastopol" and two or three more, among them that most touching story of an Old Horse.[8] How different a shade does his vivid pen throw over the lurid picture of war. There indeed are all the old well-known features, the clanking swords, proud men, martial music, and the gay uniforms with reckless hearts beating underneath. But oh, the truthfulness of it! The coward whose pride makes him brave, the brave man whose experience makes him cautious, how the men seem to walk about beneath that keen pen, the same heroes as appear in other glowing annals of war, yet over each heart is inserted a tiny glass, and we sit and gaze upon the intricate unrecognized forces of life as they beat and throb throughout all humanity. After we are through with the book, we say — is that war? Glorious, mighty, heroic, *war*?

I saw the vivid touches of art, sensed the chaste and beautiful sentiments and brilliant descriptive power; but deeper and broader than all, swept over me the intense Truth to every detail, to every written thing, from the impulse of divine love to the tint of the wayside flower, this it was that enthralled and uplifted me with a desire to make my own life more in accord with its pure lovliness.

But there; perhaps it is needless and even annoying for me to offer remarks on what to you must have been a life-long knowledge, and so not bettered in the words of a stranger.

If you will permit me, I will now close with an earnest desire to hear from you again.

Susa Young Gates

Address:

Honolulu
Box 410
Oahu
Sandwich Islands.

P. S. Have I written your address right on the wrappers? I am so totally unaquainted with your national names and places that perhaps I have blundered in my addresses to you. Pardon me if it is so.[9]

Respectfully,
S. Y. Gates

Tolstoy also read Susa Young Gates' second letter and he was impressed by it. He wrote in his diary under the date of January 1, 1889:

> I got up, cut wood, it was warm, and I went to breakfast. My thoughts were brighter. A beautiful letter from an American woman.[10]

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[8]This is the story "Kholstomer" (1861), translated into English as "Yardstick," the name of the horse in the story.

[9]The address on the envelope is given in both Roman and crude Cyrillic letters.

[10]*Collected Works,* L. p. 16.

During the course of the next few weeks he also found time to read in part at least the two books which Susa Young Gates had sent to him, the Book of Mormon, and George Q. Cannon's *Life of Joseph Smith*, and in the privacy of his diary describe his reaction to them under the date of January 23, 1889:

> I wrote down a few things. I read both the Mormon Bible and the life of Smith and I was horrified. Yes, religion, religion proper, is the product of deception, lies for a good purpose. An illustration of this is obvious, extreme in the deception: The Life of Smith; but also other *religions,* religions proper, only in differing degrees.[11]

This passage is written in rather hasty and awkward Russian, but Tolstoy's highly negative reaction to the reading of these Mormon classics is undeniable. It is not completely clear what he meant by "religion proper,"[12] which is repeated twice in this short passage, but it appears that what he wishes to express in this case is the concept of institutionalized, organized religion, rather than that of personal faith or belief.[13] He sees in Mormonism an element which is common to other churches: deception. What is more, he suggests, and this is to be reflected in an interview given a few years later which will be discussed below, religion contains elements which are not capable of close inspection, but nonetheless, Tolstoy is willing to accept those elements for the sake of the greater good. Thus Tolstoy's attitude appears to be an uneasy combination of intellectual rejection and emotional acceptance. He cannot accept what he read in the *Life of Joseph Smith* and the Book of Mormon — and unfortunately he did not tell his diary precisely what "horrified" him — but neither does he reject religion out of hand; he remains to the end sympathetic to the principle of religious belief. It should also be noted that this passage was never printed during Tolstoy's lifetime, and it remains doubtful if he would have ever given his permission for the publication of such a brutally frank statement, although its authenticity is undeniable.

Susa Young Gates wrote one more brief letter to Tatyana Tolstoy, dated August 13, 1889, from Provo on the stationery of *The Young Woman's Journal.*

Provo City, Aug 13th, 1889

Dear Madam:—

I take the liberty of again addressing you. I returned to America last April from my visit to the Sandwich Islands.

May I ask if your father received the two books "The Book of Mormon" and the "Life of Joseph Smith" which I sent to his address several months ago, nearly a year ago in fact.

I fear that I did not get the address right, and would be pleased to know if *this* reaches you.

I enclose a Circular which will explain itself.[14] If I receive word from you that this reaches you, I shall take pleasure in forward-

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[11]*Collected Works,* L, p. 22.

[12]In Russian "sobstvenno religiya."

[13]In Russian "vera" or "verovaniye."

[14]This printed circular describes the new *Young Woman's Journal;* Mrs. Gates was its first editor.

ing to your father's address one of our papers, the recognized organ in fact of the Church.

Hoping you will forgive the liberty I thus take in addressing you

I remain
Yours very truly
Susa Young Gates

Thus the entire correspondence consisted of one letter from Susa Young Gates to Tolstoy and two addressed to his daughter, and in return she received one letter from Tatyana Tolstoy which has been lost. There may in addition have been one or two notes of acknowledgement from Tatyana Tolstoy to Susa Young Gates which have also been lost. The correspondence also found reflection in two entries in Tolstoy's diary, which was not published until long after the death of both Tolstoy and Mrs. Gates. So far as I know, Susa Young Gates never referred to this correspondence in any of the numerous publications with which she was associated; a search of her papers, with one notable exception which will be quoted at length in Section II below, was also fruitless.

The next episode in the story of Tolstoy's relationship to Mormonism centers about a passage written by Andrew D. White, an American statesman who interviewed Tolstoy in March, 1894, five years after the Susa Young Gates correspondence; the interview clearly shows the influence of the correspondence firstly in Tolstoy's high opinion of Mormon women and secondly in his statement concerning the element of deception in Mormonism derived from the books she sent him to read.

Andrew D. White (1832-1918) was a man of importance; he was a University President (Cornell, 1867-1885), twice a minister (Germany, 1879-1881, and Russia, 1892-1894), an Ambassador (Germany, 1897-1899), American Delegate to the Hague Conference of 1899, and was independently wealthy. Confident of his powers and position he made no concessions to Tolstoy. Defending stoutly the status quo, he interpreted Tolstoy's highly original thought as the product of a closed society; he suggested that had Tolstoy lived in the West the sharp corners of some of his theories might have been knocked off in public debate, but free discussion of political, social, and religious ideas was impossible under the Czars. But in spite of his emotional opposition to Tolstoy's ideas, he appears to have been an attentive listener, observant, and a useful foil for Tolstoy's intellectual attacks. White interviewed Tolstoy in Moscow over a period of several days when he was Minister to Russia in 1894 and here is what he reports that Tolstoy said about Mormonism during the course of their talks. He began with general remarks on religion:

> The next day he [Tolstoy] came again to my rooms and at once began speaking upon religion. He said that every man is religious and has in him a religion of his own; that religion results from the conception which a man forms of his relations to his fellow-men, and to the principle which in his opinion controls the universe; that there are three stages in religious development: first, the childhood of nations, when man thinks of the whole universe as created for him and centering in him; secondly, the maturity of nations, the time of national religions, when each nation believes that all true religion centers in it, — the Jews and the English, he said, being striking ex-

amples; and, finally, the perfected conception of nations, when man has the idea of fulfilling the will of the Supreme Power and considers himself an instrument for that purpose.

Then he turned to specific remarks on the subject of Mormonism:

He went on to say that in every religion there are two main elements, one of deception and one of devotion, and he asked me about the Mormons, some of whose books had interested him. He thought two thirds of their religion deception, but said that on the whole he preferred a religion which professed to have dug its sacred books out of the earth to one which pretended that they were let down from heaven. On learning that I had visited Salt Lake City two years before, he spoke of the good reputation of the Mormons for chastity, and asked me to explain the hold of their religion upon women.

This was White's answer to that request:

I answered that Mormonism could hardly be judged by its results at present; that, as a whole, the Mormons are, no doubt, the most laborious and decent people in the State of Utah; but that this is their heroic period, when outside pressure keeps them firmly together and arouses their devotion; that the true test will come later, when there is less pressure and more knowledge, and when the young men who are now arising begin to ask questions, quarrel with each other, and split the whole body into sects and parties.[15]

We shall return later to White's response to Tolstoy's question about Mormonism.

This passage expresses in more restrained tones the idea which Tolstoy entrusted to his diary in 1889 aroused by his reading in Mormonism. He states his conviction that any religion contains both deception and good, but as White records it, Tolstoy now says that the two elements stand in a relationship of two to one. He is not displeased by the earthly origins of the Gold Plates, preferring a secular to a divine origin for holy documents, and he speaks well of Mormonism's women, no doubt recalling the "beautiful letter of the American woman."

Shortly after the turn of the century Tolstoy was to write briefly once more of Mormonism. This was in an essay which he wrote in 1901 with the title "Concerning Religious Toleration," and the passage in which Mormonism was touched upon was devoted to the question of churches and wealth. He argued that state churches are incompatible with personal freedom because they are dependent on the wealth which is collected by force by the government. He goes on to say:

But people will say: Churches like the Quakers, Methodists, Shakers, Mormons, and in particular now, the Catholic Congregations, collect money from their members without employing the power of the state and therefore support their churches without the use of force. But this is not right: the money which has been acquired by rich individuals, and in particular, by Catholic congregations, during the course of centuries of hypnosis by money, is not a

[15]White published this account in two different locations, a periodical article, "Walks and Talks with Tolstoy" in *McClure's Magazine*, 16 (April 1901), 511 and in his *Autobiography* (New York, 1906), Vol. II, pp. 86-87. The large public was probably reached by the account in *McClure's*.

> free offering made by the members of the church, but is rather the product of the crudest kind of force. Money is acquired by means of force and always is an implement of force. If a church wishes to consider itself tolerant it must be free from all monetary influences. "Freely I have received, freely give."[16]

It is clear that Tolstoy is not concerned here with the distinctive characteristics of Mormonism, but wtih a feature which identifies it with other faiths, namely its status as a non-state church without state aid which is dependent on the faithful for the voluntary giving of funds to support the church; thus Mormonism is no different in this respect from Quakers, Methodists, Shakers, and Catholic Congregations, and Tolstoy could have added, hundreds of other churches in the West; and he condemns them all for their dependence on monetary support, money which he considers contaminated by its connection with the use of force.

This was the last word which Tolstoy wrote on Mormonism, but it did not end the story of Tolstoy and Mormonism.

II

The first Mormon reaction to Tolstoy and the first steps towards the building of a tradition that Tolstoy had a special and exceptional attitude towards Mormonism can be seen in an article written by Alice Louise Reynolds which appeared in a Church publication in December, 1901.[17] Under the title "Tolstoy" this brief article gives an outline of Tolstoy's life clearly derived from popular sources and includes numerous quotations from Andrew D. White's article in *McClure's,* which had appeared only a few months earlier. The article by White was very probably the stimulus for the Reynolds sketch, but oddly enough she never mentions or quotes from that passage in the article in which White quotes Tolstoy on the subject of Mormonism. Perhaps the editors felt that which the readers wanted was additional information on Tolstoy rather than any discussion of the rather sensitive issues raised by Tolstoy concerning Mormonism. *McClure's* was a well-known magazine with a large national circulation and White's article must have been widely discussed within Church circles. Oddly enough, there is also no mention of the Tolstoy-Gates correspondence, although Mrs. Gates was one of the founders of the *Young Woman's Journal,* and even wrote to Tolstoy on the stationery of the magazine in 1899. On the whole the Reynolds article is laudatory, noting Tolstoy's moral rectitude and concern for ethical principles with approval, but it contains nothing which is original nor particularly illuminating on the subject of Tolstoy's reputation within Mormonism.

Twenty years later, the relationship between Tolstoy and Mormonism was discussed, if briefly, in an article written by Junius F. Wells for the *Improvement Era.* When writing about his acquaintance with William Dean Howells (the subject of the article), Wells said in passing:

> I corresponded occasionally with Mr. Howells for several years; sent him the "Mormon" literature, and had the pleasure of meeting

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[16]"Concerning Religious Toleration" *Collected Works,* XXXIV, p. 297.

[17]Alice Louise Reynolds, "Tolstoy," *Young Woman's Journal,* 12 (Dec. 1901), 400-403.

him a number of times in New York and Boston. He always treated me with respectful courtesy and kindness. He recommended me to read Tolstoy, whose "American apostle" he was sometimes called. I have wondered if it might not be that the great Russian author came by his knowledge of the "Mormons" through the matter sent first to Mr. Howells, and which, in the discussion of social themes between them could very well have served its purpose. Tolstoy knew enough of "Mormonism" to say to the American minister, Andrew D. White, that so far as he had investigated the system, one third was Scriptural, one third was superstition, and the other third he could not decide: "Perhaps it is the truth!" Did he get that view through Mr. Howells? I have often wondered.[18]

In this passage Wells surmises that he was the source of Tolstoy's information about Mormonism; we know that Susa Young Gates was that intermediary. Mrs. Gates, as we shall shortly see, was quick to point this out to him. Further, he quotes, apparently from memory, from the interview which Tolstoy granted to Andrew D. White, which was published both in White's *Autobiography* and *McClure's,* significantly altering Tolstoy's statement about Mormonism. Tolstoy did not qualify his remarks by stating that "so far as he had investigated the system"; this statement is not in the original interview. White also reported that Tolstoy said that Mormonism was "two-thirds deception," and this became in Wells' article "one third was Scriptural, one third was superstition, and the other third he could not decide," a very serious distortion of Tolstoy's idea. Furthermore, he adds in quotation marks[19] "Perhaps it is the truth!" White never reported that Tolstoy said these words.

Susa Young Gates responded promptly to this passage in Wells' article in a letter which she addressed to Wells, then in England. In it she recalled the events of her correspondence with Tolstoy and, although an interval of 32 years had passed, her memory did not fail her; she could still recall substantially the events as they occurred in 1888-1889. In her letter she correctly takes credit for sending Mormon literature to Tolstoy:

Brighton, Silver Lake, Utah
August 6, 1920

Junius F. Wells
395 Edge Lane
Liverpool, England.

My dear June:

I have just read your article on William Dean Howell in the last Era. In your last paragraph you speak of Tolstoy and wonder if Mr. Howell furnished the great Russian with his knowledge of Mormonism. Of this, of course, I know nothing; but I do know that I had a correspondence with Tolstoy myself in 1886 and I sent him, by his solicitation, (although the correspondence was carried on through his daughter) The Book of Mormon, Penrose's Mormon Doctrine, President Cannon's Life of the Prophet Joseph Smith and Helen Mar Whitney's Plural Marriage with several other pamphlets. I wrote several long letters about our women and Tolstoy replied

[18]Junius F. Wells, "William Dean Howells," *Improvement Era,* 23 (August 1920), 902.

[19]The reader will note that the speaker of this phrase is not specfically identified — but it appears to be Tolstoy.

that, while he was familiar with my father's name, he had never known anything about his religion or anything connected with us. Have you read the article by Andrew D. White which occurred a few years subsequent to this correspondence? You will notice that Tolstoy asks White how it is that Mormon women are so intensely loyal to their religion. Naturally I fancied that my correspondence had impressed him, together with the books which I sent him.

You are like myself, always glad to know about these little sidelights on historical matters and so I write you this letter.

How is everything in England? Prospering I hope.

Your old time friend and Sister
(Signed) Susa Young Gates[20]

Mrs. Gates was clearly in the wrong when she said that she wrote to Tolstoy in 1886; the correct date is 1888-1889. There is also a question concerning the four books[21] with "several pamphlets" which she claims to have sent to Tolstoy; several times in the correspondence she refers to two books. Thus, she either sent the additional books by Whitney and Penrose and the pamphlets at some later day, or her memory betrayed her and she in fact only sent two books on Mormonism. All of the materials available record the arrival in Russia of only The Book of Mormon and Cannon's *Life of Joseph Smith*. The "several other pamphlets" she mentions have never been identified.

Apparently Mrs. Gates had not read Wells' article carefully or she would have noticed that he expressly states that he had read the White interview, quoting it, apparently from memory, at some length. Perhaps in the form in which he cites it she did not recognize the original on which it was based.

But Tolstoy's interview with White had not been forgotten by others, and twenty years later, in 1939, another version of the meeting appeared, also in the *Improvement Era*. This account, with the title "Count Tolstoi and the 'American Religion' " was written by Thomas J. Yates, a member of the Church and a graduate of Cornell, class of 1902. In the year 1900 he had had a conversation with Andrew D. White and at that time White recounted something of his meeting with Tolstoy which had taken place six years previously in 1894. Here is Yates' version of the encounter between the two men:

On one occasion when Dr. White called on Count Tolstoi he was informed that the Count, who among other things taught that every man should wrest from the earth enough food to keep himself and family, was out in the fields plowing, for he practised what he preached. When Tolstoi saw him, he stopped long enough for a greeting, and then stated with characteristic frankness: "I am very busy today, but if you wish to walk beside me while I am plowing, I shall be pleased to talk with you."

As the two men walked up and down the field, they discussed many subjects, and among these, religion.

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[20]The original carbon copy of this letter is in the Church Historian's Office.

[21]In addition to the well-known *Life of Joseph Smith* by George Q. Cannon, and *The Book of Mormon,* these were Helen Mar Whitney, *Plural Marriage as Taught by the Prophet Joseph Smith; A Reply to Joseph Smith, Editor of the Lamoni (Iowa) "Herald"* (Salt Lake City, Utah, 1882), and Charles William Penrose, *"Mormon" Doctrine, Plain and Simple; or Leaves from the Tree of Life,* (Salt Lake City, Utah, 1882; Second Edition, 1888).

Yates' memory was playing him false in this passage. According to White's written account, the lengthy interview which went on over several days took place on the street, in a museum, and in Tolstoy's Moscow home. So far as I know White never visited the estate of Tolstoy and never walked alongside of Tolstoy's plough.

> "Dr. White" said Count Tolstoi, "I wish you would tell me about your American religion."
>
> "We have no state church in America," replied Dr. White.
>
> "I know that, but what about your American religion?"
>
> Patiently then Dr. White explained to the Count that in America there are many religions, and that each person is free to belong to the particular church in which he is interested.
>
> To this Tolstoi impatiently replied: "I know all of this, but I want to know about the *American religion.* Catholicism originated in Rome; the Episcopal Church originated in England; the Lutheran Church in Germany, but the Church to which I refer originated in America, and is commonly known as the Mormon Church. What can you tell me of the teachings of the Mormons?"
>
> "Well," said Dr. White, "I know very little concerning them. They have an unsavory reputation, they practice polygamy, and are very superstitious."

Whatever may be said of this version of the interview, this attribution is grossly unfair to White, whose attitude towards Mormons and Mormonism was enlightened, if not partisan. Moreover, it seems improbable that White would express such crude opinions to Yates whom he knew to be a Mormon. To go on:

> Then Count Leo Tolstoi, in his honest and stern, but lovable manner, rebuked the ambassador. "Dr. White, I am greatly surprised and disappointed that a man of your great learning and position should be so ignorant on this important subject. The Mormon people teach the American religion; their principles teach the people not only of Heaven and its attendant glories, but how to live so that their social and economic relations with each other are placed on a sound basis. If the people follow the teachings of this Church, nothing can stop their progress – it will be limitless. There have been great movements started in the past but they have died or been modified before they reached maturity. If Mormonism is able to endure, unmodified, until it reaches the third and fourth generation, it is destined to become the greatest power the world has ever known."[22]

Before discussing the significance of these statements in the light of what has been recorded elsewhere about Tolstoy's attitude toward Mormonism, it should be noted that Yates wrote down the account of his interview with White thirty-nine years after it took place, and the Tolstoy interview was six years before this. Thus, the Yates account of Tolstoy's words had been through a double filter over a forty-five year period: his own recollection eroded by the passage of thirty-nine years and that of White six years after the fact. Moreover, Yates in his article of 1939 does not mention any written account of his interview with White, nor does he mention the possibility that White referred to notes during their conversations at Cornell; both were apparently relying on their powers of recollection.

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[22]Thomas J. Yates, "Count Tolstoi and the 'American Religion,'" *Improvement Era,* 43 (Feb. 1939), 94.

On the other hand, so far as the version recounted by Yates differs from White's *Autobiography* and the *McClure's* article, it appears that the earlier version by White is to be preferred. It was written at a much earlier date and records Tolstoy's words at first, not second hand, and it seems reasonable to assume that White was relying on notes for his version, since it contains a great wealth of detail — White's account of his talks with Tolstoy in Moscow occupies thirty pages of text in his *Autobiography*. Yates made one serious error in fact which also casts a doubt on the reliability of his account, as I have already noted: he sets the controversial conversation in a field with Tolstoy behind the plough when in fact it took place in Moscow; this would also seem to indicate that Yates did not read White's version before he wrote his article or he would surely have caught this glaring error.

What is new in Yates' account? The answer is that it is basically different from all other evidence for the study of Tolstoy's relationship to Mormonism. Three extravagant assertions are made, which are ascribed to Tolstoy and which are recorded in no other source: that Tolstoy believed that Mormonism was the typically American religion, that Mormonism provided a method for placing social and economic relations on a sound basis, and that Mormonism has a noble future if it resists change.

Tolstoy was a great student of comparative religions and he had an inexhaustible curiosity about religious matters, but, as should be apparent from the earlier passages of this study, he apparently did not devote much time and attention to Mormonism. At no time in his printed works or in recorded interviews did he express any ideas that Mormonism had any special qualification to be the most outstanding native American Church. There is no indication at any time that he held it in any higher esteem than any other American faith. Similarly, Tolstoy never expressed to anyone the view that Mormonism had any great claims as a solution to the world's economic and political problems. Given his egalitarian and anti-capitalist views it seems highly improbable that he could hold such views. For example, while he admired the Quakers for their pacifist views he criticised them strongly for their belief in private property; he may have made the same criticism of Mormonism as he knew it. It is also very hard to conceive that Tolstoy could approve of the authoritarianism of Mormonism, since one of the most pervasive aspects of his social thought is the rejection of institutionalized authority at all levels, whether by the state, the army or a church. Moreover, the statement attributed to him that the hope of the Church lay in resistance to change is also completely unexpected and is not in accord with anything else ever recorded. However, this claim is strangely reminiscent of White's response to Tolstoy's question as White recorded it:

> I answered that Mormonism could hardly be judged by its results at present; that, as a whole, the Mormons are, no doubt, the most laborious and decent people in the State of Utah; but that this is their heroic period, when outside pressure keeps them firmly together and arouses their devotion; that the true test will come later, when there is less pressure and more knowledge, and when the young men who are now arising begin to ask questions, quarrel with each other, and split the whole body into sects and parties.[23]

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[23]See above.

Could it be that Yates remembered this opinion of White's and over the years attributed it not to White but to Tolstoy, simplifying it and altering its thrust?

It appears in retrospect that there will never be a solution to the question of the reliability of Yates' version of his conversation with White in Ithaca in 1900.[24] It is my opinion, however, that the great interval of time separating the sequence of events, the apparent reliance upon memory rather than written records on the part of both White and Yates, and the extravagance of the claims for Mormonism attributed to Tolstoy which completely lack confirmation from any other printed sources from the literature on Tolstoy, cast very serious doubts on the reliability of Yates' account.

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[24]Apparently it is Yates' article which is the source of the pervasive oral tradition within Mormonism that Tolstoy had an especially favorable attitude towards Mormonism. Yates' articles also served as the major source of a recent article by Truman Madsen ("What Did Tolstoy see in Mormonism?" *The New Era*, 1 [March 1971], 46-49). I regret that limitations in space make it impossible to discuss this article at length here. Madsen's article is based upon the Yates article, the Wells article, and the letter which Susa Young Gates wrote to Wells; the major source of ideas on Tolstoy's thought appears to be White's *Autobiography*. Madsen heavily emphasizes Tolstoy's purported predictions for Mormonism's future as reported by Yates. In addition to containing a number of factual errors, the article is characterized by an unwarranted interpretation of Tolstoy's attitude towards Mormonism which makes him out to be a far warmer advocate of Mormonism than the facts justify, I believe.

"The function of art is to make that understood which in the form of argument would be incomprehensible."

—Tolstoy