

Between holy places
in russia, to pay



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Between 1875 and 1877, Leo Tolstoy, nobility by birth, wrote installments of Anna Karenina. While writing Anna Karenina, he became obsessed with the meaning and purpose of life. This led Tolstoy to compose the essay, My Confession, detailing his agonizing religious and moral self-examination, published in 1882.

He devoted another three years to the discovery of the meaning and purpose of life. At the close of the seven years of only non-fiction essays, Tolstoy resumed writing and publishing fictional works. However, he did write two more essays devoted to the meaning of life, What Then Must We Do (1886) and The Kingdom of God is Within You (1892). Tolstoy, in 1886 wrote a particularly intriguing tale of a bishop and three old men, The Three Hermits, which reflects Tolstoys search for purpose and the meaning of life.

The Three Hermits is a journey, both physical and spiritual, similar to Tolstoys faith journey. A bishop was sailing from Archangel to the Solovetsk Monastery, and on the same vessel were a number of pilgrims on their way to visit the shrine at that place (Tolstoy, p. 1). The story goes on to say that a fisherman on board relayed the tale of the three hermits who live on an island near where they currently were sailing.

The Bishop becomes very curious, and insists upon meeting the hermits. The other pilgrims protest at the idea of stopping. The captain also objects and informs the bishop, The old men are not worth your pains. I have heard said that they are foolish old fellows, who understand nothing, and never speak a word, any more than the fish in the sea (Tolstoy, p. 3). This passage makes an ironic point.

The pilgrims travel to Solovetsk, home of a monastery considered one of the holy places in Russia, to pay homage and receive Gods favor, yet they are unwilling to learn from people close to God, much like the people of Tolstoy's time, too wrapped up in the church's doctrine to see the way to God. Tolstoy wrote in *Repent ye, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at Hand*, a chapter of *The Kingdom of God is Within You* that Christians must aspire to the Kingdom of God, not the kingdoms of the world, meaning that the idols and relics of the church are worthless, people should instead visit God through meaningful prayer, good deeds, and work. The tale continues on to say, the cable was quickly let out, the anchor cast and the sails furled. Then a boat having been lowered the oarsman jumped in, and the Bishop descended the ladder and took a seat (Tolstoy, p. 3). This could be interpreted as the bishop being humbled, lowering himself on to the boat.

A bishop is defined as an overseer, a supervisor, holding a position one rank over a priest. Therefore, he by going to the island humbled himself. The story continues in the tale by telling of the hermits, how they bowed before him, and the priests teaching them to pray, the Lords Prayer, instead of theirs, *Three are ye, three are we, have mercy upon us* (Tolstoy, p. 4). Upon leaving, the priest in the distance hears them praying.

When the island was no longer visible, he relaxed and he thanked God for having sent him to teach and help such godly men (Tolstoy, p. 5). No sooner had he uttered the words than did the Hermits appear running through the water. The three in one voice said, *We have forgotten your teaching, servant of God. As long as we kept repeating it, we remembered, but when we stopped saying it for a time, a word dropped out, and now it all has gone to*

pieces. We can remember nothing of it. Teach us again. The bishop crossed himself and leaning over the ships side said: Your own prayer will reach the Lord, men of God.

It is not for me to teach you. Pray for us sinners. And the Bishop bowed low before the men.

(p. 5-6). The hermits show a great deal of respect for the church and God, thus, they bow low before the Bishop, as a sign of respect, knowing he is Gods servant. This gives him a false idea of superiority, not implied intentionally by the Hermits. However, the hermits have the upper hand. Though they patiently learned the Lords Prayer and allowed the Bishop to teach them to pray, they, in the end, teach him the truth of God and prayer.

This point is shown, in that, as soon as the Bishop commended himself, the hermits appeared, and asked him to re-teach the prayer. Matthew 6: 7 sums it up: But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking (KJV, Matt 6: 7), meaning that the hermits had no understanding of the words the spoke, they went along with the lesson in the name of pleasing God. However, the prayer they made came from their hearts, which made them closer to God. The Bishop understood this and bowed lower to show the hermits that they were far superior. The walking on water also is a lesson in faith. The hermits possessed such an extreme faith in God, and divine interest in salvation that they could run at incredible speeds across water, as if it were dry land.

In the bible, Jesus shows that with faith walking on water is possible. About three o'clock in the morning Jesus came to them, walking on the water. Then

Peter called to him, “ Lord, if it’s really you, tell me to come to you by walking on water.” “ All right, come,” Jesus said. So Peter went over the side of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus. But when he looked around at the high waves, he was terrified and began to sink. “ Save me, Lord!” he shouted.

Instantly Jesus reached out his hand and grabbed him. “ You don’t have much faith,” Jesus said. “ Why did you doubt me?” (New Living Translation, Matthew 14: 25, 27-31). Tolstoy makes to reference the Trinity, showing a divine presence in his journey. The story says that, he saw the three men: a tall one, a shorter one, and one very small and bent, standing on shore and holding each other by the hand (p. 3). According to the Trinity, the father, son, and Holy Spirit are one. Three is also important in the fact that three days after Christ died, he rose again (New Living Translation, Luke 9: 22).

Noah had three sons (Genesis 5: 32). The Bible mentions the number three about 400 times. However, Tolstoy amplifies the image of the trinity in his description of each of the three, One is a small man and his back is bent. He wears a priests cassock and is very old; he must be more than one hundred, I would say.

He is so old that the white of his beard is taking a greenish tinge, but he is always smiling, and his face is as bright as an angels from heaven. (p. 2). Tolstoy seems to describe either the Father or the Holy Spirit.

The priests garb allows the reader to make a connection between a priest commonly called father and the old man. In addition to being the eldest, he also may be the one considered the father, considering that the others look

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to him for guidance. For example, the bishop asked what they are doing to serve God and save your souls. The second hermit sighed, and looked at the oldest, the very ancient one (p. 4). Nonetheless, being the eldest he also could be the all-encompassing Holy Ghost. The brightness of his face leads a person to believe he is not of this world, like a spirit.

The second is taller, but he is also very old. He wears a tattered peasant coat. His beard is broad, and of a yellowish gray color. He is a strong man...

He is too kindly and cheerful (p. 2). The second hermit represents the Father.

God has great strength, enough to bear the weight of the world. The second hermit also has tremendous strength. The Lord is righteous in everything he does; he is filled with kindness (New Living Translation, Psalms 145: 17). The second, according to the sailors description is also kind-hearted. The third is tall, and has a beard as white a snow reaching to his knees.

He is stern, with overhanging eyebrows; and he wears nothing but a piece of matting tied around his waist (p. 2). The matting tied around the thirds waist is remnant of Christ at crucifixion; the soldiers stripped him of most of his garments, leaving him with enough to cover his waist. Another similarity between the third and the Son is that the third is stern as was Jesus in his adult life. The struggle to find faith has created an enigma for Tolstoy, brought to life in a fable. The Three Hermits span time in understanding the journey to the meaning of life. To this day, the puzzle never has been solved and may never be solved. In the immortal words of Tolstoy, If you are content with the old world, try to preserve it, it is very sick and cannot hold out much longer.

But if you cannot bear to live in everlasting dissonance between your beliefs and your life, thinking one thing and doing another, get out of the medieval witted sepulchers, and face your fears. I know very well it is not easy (The Anarchist Library, p. 1). Works Cited Tolstoy, Leo. The Three Hermits.

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