



Peter Yakovlevich Chaadaev (1794–1856)

*The Major Works of
Peter Chaadaev*

A TRANSLATION AND COMMENTARY

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Preface

PETER CHAADAEV emerges from the pages of Russian history as one of Russia's most provocative and influential thinkers. The purpose of this book is to present the reader with the first complete English translation of his major works. During the first half of the nineteenth century Chaadaev incited a violent polemic concerning the historical significance of Russian culture. His ideas concerning Russia's real mission in the world still provoke controversy in the Soviet Union. Yet, despite his significance, no complete English translation of his two major works, *The Philosophical Letters Addressed to a Lady* and *Apologia of a Madman*, has been published until now. My English translation with commentary and explanatory notes was done in the conviction that these materials should be made readily available to the English-reading public.

The background material in this book is expository; I have not attempted to write a complete biographical study of Chaadaev, nor have I tried to make any original inquiry into Chaadaev's philosophy. The point of view is simply that of a historian who admires Chaadaev's insights into the meaning of history in general

and Russian history in particular, so the background material has been limited to a biographical sketch of Chaadaev and a short analysis of his major ideas on history. Since there was no definitive edition of Chaadaev's original works in print when this project was begun in 1961, a thorough search was made in the manuscript collections of Moscow and Leningrad. All the extant manuscripts of *The Philosophical Letters* and the *Apologia of a Madman* were found, studied, and evaluated to determine as far as possible how Chaadaev himself would have wanted these works to have appeared in print had he been able to publish all the *Letters* and the *Apologia* around 1836.

Utilizing the latest Soviet archival reference works, I was able to pinpoint the whereabouts of some of the Chaadaeviana. The manuscript collections in the Soviet Union provided me with further clues to other source materials. Having found the manuscripts, I had them microfilmed and began submitting them to tests to determine authenticity and relative reliability. I also tried to discover when each of the manuscripts had been written. I then concerned myself with the variants. In dealing with the manuscripts in which Chaadaev deleted whole passages and changed the wording of the texts himself, I used two criteria: 1) What changes apparently represented Chaadaev's final choices around October of 1836? 2) If Chaadaev had had the opportunity of preparing all *The Philosophical Letters* for publication in a completed series and the *Apologia of a Madman* around the end of 1836, which of the variants would he, in all likelihood, have chosen? The admirable scholarly work done on the Chaadaev manuscripts by the late Dmitri Ivanovich Sha-

was of invaluable aid to me in completing this. The result, my critical edition of the original manuscripts of Chaadaev's *Philosophical Letters* and *Apologia of a Madman*, was published in Berlin in 1967.

Having reconstructed the original texts by collating various manuscripts, I translated them into English to make Chaadaev accessible to students without mastery of the French language. (Chaadaev wrote his works in French, rather than in Russian.) I have tried to concentrate upon the meaning, rather than the style, which Chaadaev was, in my opinion, attempting to communicate to the reader. In addition, despite the fact that the English-reading public is not accustomed to long periodic sentences in our day, I have not invariably allowed them to stand as they appear in the manuscripts in order to convey some of the flavor of Chaadaev's style.

A word of warning seems in order here before this study begins: Chaadaev does not appeal to anyone in search of a systematized, unified philosophical analysis of history. He did not contribute anything particularly original to the academic field of philosophy or to that of history. His significance rests upon his peculiar articulation of a particular set of religious and philosophical ideas to the study of Russia's place in history. In Chaadaev's mind, the particular problem of the historical significance of Russian culture revolved around a few specific questions which he formulated for the first time, and in a highly provocative manner: Does Russia belong to the East or to the West? Is Russian culture European or Asiatic? Does it belong to the Judaeo-Christian, Graeco-Roman world? What his-

LETTER I

Adveniat regnum tuum

Madame,

It is your frankness and your sincerity that I love and respect most of all. So you can imagine what a surprise I was bound to get from your letter! These were the amiable traits of yours which charmed me from the moment I met you and which also induced me to talk with you about religion. Everything in your environment constrained me to remain silent. So imagine once again what a surprise was in store for me when I received your letter.¹ Madame, that is all I can say to you about the opinion which you presume that I have formed about your character. Let us drop the subject and proceed at once to the serious portion of your letter.

First, what is the source of this intellectual disturbance which perturbs and fatigues you so, you say, even to the point of impairing your health? Could this then be the unfortunate result of our talks? The emotion newly-awakened in your heart should have brought you calm and peace; instead it has caused you some anxiety, scruples, almost feelings of remorse. But should

I be surprised at that? It is the natural effect of that disastrous condition which encroaches upon all hearts and minds in our country. You merely yielded to the influence of forces which dominate everything here from the highest strata of society to the slave who exists only for the pleasure of his master.

Besides, how could you have rebuffed it? The traits which distinguish you from the crowd must also render you particularly susceptible to the bad effects of the air which you breathe. Could the little which I have allowed myself to say to you bring stability to your ideas amid all that surrounds you? Could I purify the atmosphere in which we live? I should have anticipated the result, and I did anticipate it. That is the reason for these frequent hesitations so little effective in bringing conviction into your soul and which must have naturally bewildered you. Besides, if I had not been convinced that, no matter what troubles it may cause in your heart, partially awakened religious sentiment is better than complete lethargy I would have been forced to regret my zeal. But these clouds which overcast your sky today will be dissolved one day, I hope, into redeeming dew which will impregnate the seed sown in your heart, and the effect which some insignificant words have produced upon you is my assurance of the greater effects which your own intellectual labor will certainly produce as a result. Madame, surrender yourself without fear to emotions which the religious ideas will summon within you; only pure feelings can issue from this pure source.

Now with reference to exterior circumstances, be

content for the time being with the knowledge that only the teaching founded upon the supreme principle of unity and of the direct transmission of truth in an uninterrupted succession of its ministers can be the most in accord with the true spirit of religion; for it is epitomized in the idea of fusing all moral forces upon the earth into a simple thought, into a simple sentiment, and into the gradual establishment of a social system or church, which must make truth reign among men. Every other teaching, by the sole fact of its separation from the original doctrine, wholly rejects the object of this sublime invocation of the Saviour: "My Father, I beg you that they may be one as we are one,"² and does not want God's reign upon earth. But from this it does not follow that you are bound to profess this truth before the world; your vocation certainly does not lie in this. On the contrary, the very principle from which this truth is derived obliges you, in view of your position in society, to look upon this truth as an inner firebrand for your faith, and nothing more. I consider myself fortunate for having contributed to turning your ideas towards religion, but I would feel very wretched, Madame, if at the same time I may have caused your conscience perplexities which, in the long run, could only make your faith grow cold.

I believe I told you once that the best way of preserving religious sentiment is to conform to all the customs prescribed by the Church. This exercise in submission, which includes more than is commonly imagined, and which the greatest minds have imposed upon themselves after conscious reflection, is genuine wor-

ship rendered to God. Nothing strengthens the spirit in its faith as much as the rigorous practice of all the obligations which relate to the faith. Moreover, most of the rites in the Christian religion which emanate from supreme reason are a truly life-giving force for one who knows how to become permeated with the truths which they express. There is only one exception to this otherwise wholly general rule, namely, when within himself a man finds beliefs of an order superior to that which the masses profess, beliefs which elevate the soul to the very source of all our certitudes yet which do not contradict but, on the contrary, support the popular beliefs; then, and only then, is it permissible to neglect the exterior observances, in order to devote oneself better to more important works. But woe to him who mistakes the illusions of his conceit, the deceptions of his reason, for extraordinary illuminations releasing him from the general law! Madame, is there anything better for you to do than to clothe yourself in this robe of humility which becomes your sex so well? Believe me, this can best calm your disturbed spirits and infuse some sweetness into your existence.

Even from the standpoint of worldly ideas, for a woman whose cultivated mind is able to find charm in study and in the serious emotions of meditation, I ask you, is there a way of life more natural than quite an earnest one, devoted in large part to the thought and practice of religion? In your readings, you say, nothing appeals to your imagination as much as scenes from the lives of tranquil and serene persons; scenes which,

like those of a beautiful countryside at close of day, calm the soul and remove us for a moment from a painful or insipid reality. Well, these are not fantastic paintings; it depends entirely upon you to make one of these charming fictions real; you have all the necessary requirements for it. You see that I do not preach a very austere morality. It is in your tastes, in the most pleasant dreams of your imagination that I am going to find that which can bring peace into your soul.

There is a certain aspect of life which bears no relationship to physical being but which refers to intellectual being; it must not be disregarded; there is a diet for the soul just as there is one for the body; one must learn how to submit oneself to it. That is an old adage, I realize, but I believe that very often it still has all the merits of an innovation in our country. One of the most deplorable things in our unique civilization is that we are still just beginning to discover truths which are trite elsewhere—even among people less advanced than we in certain respects. That follows from the fact that we have never advanced along with other people; we are not related to any of the great human families; we belong neither to the West nor to the East, and we possess the traditions of neither. Placed, as it were, outside of the times, we have not been affected by the universal education of mankind. This admirable linking of human ideas throughout the passing centuries, this history of the human spirit which led the human spirit to the position which it occupies in the rest of the world today, had no effect upon us. What has long since constituted the very

basis of social life in other lands is still only theory and speculation for us. And, I really must say it to you, Madame, you who are so fortunately disposed to gather all that is good and true on earth and to neglect nothing which affords the sweetest and purest joys of the soul, what have you accomplished, I ask you, with all these advantages? You are still looking not for something to fill up your life, but merely your day. You lack the very things which form the necessary framework of life elsewhere, where all the daily events are ordered so naturally, a condition as indispensable for a wholesome, moral existence as fresh air is for healthy, physical existence. You realize that I am not yet referring either to moral principles or to philosophical maxims but simply to a well-ordered life, to those habits and those patterns of the intellect, which provide leisure for the mind and impose a regular movement upon the soul.

Look around you. Do we not all have one foot in the air? It looks as if we were all travelling. There is no definite sphere of existence for anyone, no good habits, no rule for anything at all; not even a home; nothing which attracts or awakens our endearment or affections, nothing lasting, nothing enduring; everything departs, everything flows away, leaving no traces either without or within ourselves. In our houses we are like campers; in our families we are like strangers; in our cities we are like nomads, more nomadic than the herdsmen who let their animals graze on our steppes, for they are more bound to their deserts than we to our cities. And do not think for a moment that

this is something unimportant. Poor souls that we are! Let us not add ignorance of ourselves to our other miseries, and let us not aspire to the life of pure intellects; rather let us learn how to live sensibly within our given situation. But first let us talk some more about our country; we shall not go beyond our theme. Without this preamble you could not understand what I have to say to you.

For all peoples there is a time of violent agitation, passionate restlessness, and activity without conscious motivation. During that time men are physically and intellectually world-wanderers. This is the age of great passions, great emotions, great enterprises of the people. People are then vehemently aroused without any apparent object but not without benefit for their future descendants. Each society has undergone these periods. They furnish it with its most vivid recollections, its myths, its poetry, all its strongest and most fertile ideas. These are necessary bases of society. Otherwise societies would not have anything within their memory to which they would cling, anything towards which they could feel affection; they would merely cling to the dust of their soil. This interesting epoch in a people's history is the adolescence of the people. It is the moment in which their faculties develop most powerfully, and their memory of it constitutes the joy and the edification of their age of maturity. We, on the other hand, have nothing like that. First a brutal barbarism,³ then crude superstition,⁴ after that fierce, spreading foreign domination by strangers⁵ whose heritage was later inherited by the national government⁶

—that is the sad history of our youth. Our history experienced nothing remotely similar to this age of exuberant activity, this exalted play of the moral powers of the people. The epoch of our social life which corresponds to this moment was filled by a dull and somber existence without vigor and without energy, in which the only thing that animated us was crime, the only thing that pacified us was slavery. No charming memories and no gracious images live in our memory, no forceful lessons in our national tradition. Glance over all the centuries through which we have lived, all the land which we cover, you will find not one endearing object of remembrance, not one venerable monument which might evoke powerfully bygone eras and might vividly and picturesquely depict them again for you. We live only in the most narrow kind of present without a past and without a future in the midst of a shallow calm. And if we stir sometimes, it is neither with hope nor desire for some common good, but with the puerile frivolity of the child who raises himself up and lifts his hands towards the rattle which the nurse shows to him.

Genuine human development in society cannot begin for any nation until life has become better organized, easier, sweeter than amid the incertitudes of this first epoch. As long as societies swing back and forth without convictions and without rules, even for routine matters, and as long as life is not organized, how can you expect the seeds of the good to take root? There persists the chaotic fermentation of things in the moral sphere, similar to the eruptions of the globe which pre-

ceded the present state of the planet. We are still at that stage.

Our early years, spent in immobile brutishness, have left no trace in our minds, and we do not have any individuality upon which to base our thoughts; but, isolated by a strange destiny from the universal movement of humanity, we have absorbed nothing, not even traditive ideas of mankind. It is upon these ideas, however, that the life of people is based; it is from these ideas that the future of people unfolds and from them comes their moral development. If we wish to take up a position similar to that of other civilized people, we must, in a certain sense, repeat the whole education of mankind. For this purpose we have the history of humanity and the results from the passing of the centuries before us. Undoubtedly this task is difficult, and it is not perhaps possible for a man to exhaust this vast subject, but, above all, it is necessary to realize the question involved: what is this education of the human race, what is the place which we occupy in the general order?

Peoples live only by the strong impressions which the past leaves upon their minds and by contact with other peoples. Thus, each individual senses his relationship to humanity as a whole. "What is the life of man worth," asks Cicero, "if the memory of past facts fails to succeed in integrating the present with the past?" But, as for us, who have come into the world like illegitimate children without a heritage, without a link with the men who preceded us on earth, we possess within our hearts no teachings prior to our own

existence. Each one of us must individually try to mend the rift broken within the family. What is habit and instinct in other people must be forced into our heads with hammer blows. Our memories do not go back beyond yesterday; we are, in a manner of speaking, strangers to our own selves. We move so peculiarly in time that, as we advance, each preceding moment escapes us irrevocably. This is a natural consequence of a culture based wholly upon importation and imitation. With us there is no inner development, no natural progression; new ideas sweep away the old, because they do not proceed from those old ones but come to us out of the blue. Since we only adopt ready-made ideas, the indelible characteristics which a movement of progressive ideas engraves upon men's minds and gives them power, does not even make an impression upon our intellects. We grow but we do not mature; we advance but in an oblique line, i.e., in a line which does not lead to any goal. We resemble children who have not been taught to think for themselves, and who, having become adults, have nothing of their own; all their knowledge lies on the surface of their existence, their whole soul exists outside themselves. That is our precise situation.

Peoples are moral beings just as individuals are. It takes centuries to educate them, just as it takes years to educate a person. In a sense, it can be said that we are an exceptional people. We are one of those nations which does not seem to form an integral part of humanity, but which exists only to provide some great lesson for the world. The lesson which we are destined

to provide will assuredly not be lost, but who knows when we shall find ourselves amid humanity and how much misery we shall experience before the fulfillment of our destiny?

Europeans have a common physiognomy, a family resemblance. Despite the general division of these people into Latin and Teutonic branches, into the southern and the northern, there is a common bond which unites them in one whole, evident to anyone who has profoundly studied their history. You know that not very long ago all of Europe was called Christendom and this word had its place in public law. Besides this general characteristic, each of these people has a particular characteristic, but all that is simply part of the history and tradition of each and forms the hereditary patrimony of ideas among these people. In Europe each individual enjoys his share of the heritage; without strain or work during his lifetime each collects and utilizes notions disseminated in society. Draw the comparison yourself and see what elementary ideas we can acquire in this way during our daily lives, in order to use them, for better or worse, in molding our lives. And note that this is not a question of study or reading, nor has it anything to do with literature or science; it is simply the contact of intellects; in the crib the child is seized by these ideas which surround him amid his games, and are communicated to him by his mother's caresses; finally, under the form of diverse emotions these ideas permeate the marrow of his bones along with the air which he breathes and have formed his moral being even before he is sent out

into the world and society. So you want to know what these ideas are? They are the ideas of duty, justice, law, and order. They originate in the very events which have built up society; they are the integral elements in the social world of these countries. This is the atmosphere of the West; it is more than history, more than psychology; it is the physiology of the European. What have you to substitute for that in our country?

I do not know whether or not we can deduce something perfectly absolute from what I have just said and from this derive some rigorous principle, but it is obvious that, when a nation's thoughts cannot be connected with any set of ideas gradually and progressively developed in society, and when its participation in the general movement of the human spirit was confined to a blind, superficial, often awkward imitation of other nations, then this strange situation must powerfully influence the spirit of each individual in that nation. As a result, you will find that we all lack a certain self-confidence, method of thought, and logic. We are unfamiliar with the western syllogism. There is something close to frivolity in our best minds. The best ideas for lack of any relationship and consistency are paralyzed like sterile dazzlements in our heads. It is in man's nature to lose himself when he does not find the means of referring his condition to what preceded and what follows him; then all consistency, all certitude escapes him; without the feeling of continuity to guide him, he discovers that he has wandered aimlessly in the world. There are some of these lost souls in every land, but in ours it is a common characteristic.

It is not this lightness of spirit which the French were once accused of and which was, by the way, just an uncomplicated way of understanding reality, which excluded neither intellectual profundity nor breadth and endowed human affairs with an infinite amount of gracefulness and charm; it is really the carelessness of a life without experience and conjecture, one which is unrelated to anything more than the ephemeral existence of the individual detached from the species and which adheres neither to honor nor to the advancement of any community of ideas or interests whatever—not even to the family inheritances and to this fund of prescriptions and perspectives which regulate both public and private life in an order of things founded upon the recollection of the past and the probable outcome of the future. We have absolutely no universal ideas; everything is individual, volatile, and incomplete. Even in our glances I find that there is something strangely vague, cold, uncertain, resembling somewhat the features of people placed at the lowest rung of the social ladder. In foreign lands, especially in the south, where physiognomies are so lively and so expressive, I often compared the faces of the inhabitants to those of my compatriots and I was struck by the sullenness in ours.

Some foreigners have credited us with a kind of careless temerity which is especially noticeable among the lower classes in the nation; but, only able to observe certain isolated effects of the national character, they were not able to assess the whole. They did not realize that the same principle which makes us so bold some-

times also makes us always incapable of profundity and perseverance; they failed to see that what renders us so indifferent to the hazards of life also renders us equally indifferent to good and evil, to truth and falsehood, and that this very characteristic deprives us of all the incentives which urge men along the paths of improvement; they did not perceive that it is precisely this slothful audacity which explains the fact that in our country even the upper classes are not, sad to say, exempt from vices which belong only to the very lowest classes in other places; they have not noticed that, though we have some of the virtues of nations which are young and only slightly civilized, we do not have any virtues of nations which are mature and highly cultured. I am certainly not claiming that there are only vices among us and only virtues among Europeans, God forbid! But I do say that, in order to judge nations, the pervading spirit which constitutes their existence must be studied, for it is this spirit alone which can direct them towards a more perfect moral state and towards an unending development, and not such and such a trait of their character.

The masses are subjected to certain forces placed at the summits of society. They do not think for themselves; among them there is a certain number of thinkers who do the thinking for them, incite the nation's collective mind, and make it advance. While the minority meditates, the rest feel, and the general movement occurs. Aside from some stupid races which have become brutish and preserved only the appearance of human nature, this is true of all the nations on

earth. The primitive Europeans, Celts, Scandinavians, Germans, had their Druids, their skalds, and their bards, who were powerful thinkers in their own right. Consider the North American people whom the material civilization of the United States is so intent upon destroying; among them there are men worthy of admiration because of their profundity. Now I ask you, where are our wise men, where are our thinkers? Who is there who has ever thought for us, who is there who thinks for us today?

However, situated between the two great divisions of the world, between the East and the West, supporting ourselves with one elbow on China and another on Germany, we ought to have united within us the two great principles of intelligent nature—imagination and reason—and incorporated the histories of the entire globe into our civilization. The role allotted to us by Providence was not that at all. Far from it, Providence does not seem to have been interested in our destiny at all. Suspending in our case its beneficent action upon men's spirit, Providence has left us completely on our own, has refused all involvement in any of our affairs, and has not cared to teach us anything. For us historical experience does not exist; ages and generations have flowed by fruitlessly for us. It would seem that in our case the general law of humanity has been revoked. Alone in the world, we have given nothing to the world, taken nothing from the world, bestowed not even a single idea upon the fund of human ideas, contributed nothing to the progress of the human spirit, and we have distorted all progressivity which

has come to us. Nothing from the first moment of our social existence has emanated from us for man's common good; not one useful idea has germinated in the sterile soil of our fatherland; we have launched no great truth; we have never bothered to conjecture anything ourselves, and we have adopted only deceiving appearances and useless luxury from all the things that others have thought out.

A peculiar thing! Even in the world of science, which includes everything, our history is not linked with anything and neither explains nor demonstrates a thing. If the barbarian hordes which convulsed the world had not passed through the country in which we live before precipitating themselves upon the West, we would scarcely have furnished a chapter in world history. In order to call attention to ourselves, we had to expand from the Bering Straits to the Oder. One time, a great man wanted to civilize us,⁷ and in order to give us a foretaste of enlightenment, he threw us the cloak of civilization: we took up the cloak but did not so much as touch civilization. Another time, another great Prince,⁸ associating us with his glorious mission, led us victoriously from one end of Europe to the other: upon our return from this triumphal march across the most civilized lands in the world, we brought only evil ideas and fatal errors which resulted in an immense calamity which threw us back a half a century.⁹ We have something or other in our blood which alienates any real progress. Finally, we lived and do now live simply to serve as some great lesson to far-distant posterity which will become aware of it; today, in spite of

what anyone says, we do not amount to a thing in the intellectual order. I cannot stop being dumbfounded by this void and this surprising solitude of our social existence. Certainly, an unfathomable destiny is partly responsible for this. But man is also responsible for it, as he is for everything which occurs within the moral world. Let us consult history again; it is history which explains people.

What were we doing as the edifice of modern civilization was arising out of the struggle between the northern people's energetic barbarism and the lofty religious thought?¹⁰ Forced by a fatal destiny, we proceeded to seek the moral code which was to constitute our education¹¹ in miserable Byzantium, an object held in profound contempt by these peoples. A moment before, an ambitious spirit* had removed this Christian family from the universal fraternity: the idea we reaped was in this way disfigured by human passion. In Europe at that time the vivifying principle of unity animated everything. Everything emanated from it and everything converged in it. The entire intellectual movement of this epoch was directed solely towards the unity of human thought, and every impulse arose from this powerful need to arrive at a universal idea, which is the genius of modern times. Strangers to this marvelous principle, we became a prey for conquest.¹² And then when freed from the foreign yoke, had we not been separated from the common family, we might have profited from these ideas which had arisen dur-

* Photius¹²

ing this period among our western brothers, however, we fell into an even more obdurate slavery,¹⁴ sanctified by the fact of our deliverance.

What clear illumination already burst forth¹⁵ then in Europe out of the apparent darkness which had enclosed Europe! Most of the knowledge which the human spirit is proud of today had already been perceived and, in returning to pagan antiquity,¹⁶ the Christian world rediscovered the forms of the beautiful which it still lacked. But we were isolated in our schism, and nothing that was happening in Europe reached us. We had nothing to do with the great work of the world. The eminent qualities with which religion had endowed modern people and which, from a healthy intellectual point of view, raises them as high above ancient people as those were raised above the Hottentots and Laplanders; the new forces with which religion had enriched human intelligence and the customs which submission to an unarmed authority¹⁷ had rendered just as mild as they had formerly been brutal—all that passed us by. When Christianity was advancing majestically along the road which had been traced for it by its divine founder and was sweeping generations along with it, in spite of the fact that we called ourselves Christians, we did not budge. While the world was being completely rebuilt, nothing was being built in our land: we remained squatting in our hovels made of small joists and thatch. In a word, the new destinies of the human race were not accomplished in our land. Though we were Christians, the fruit of Christianity did not mature for us.

I ask you, is it not absurd to suppose as is generally done in our land that, without even bothering to find out how it was produced, we can in one stroke assimilate all this European progress, which occurred so slowly and under the direct, evident action of a unique moral power?

People understand nothing about Christianity, if they do not realize that in it there is a purely historical aspect which forms so essential a part of the dogma that in a certain way it includes all of Christian philosophy, since it reveals what Christianity has done for men and what it can do for them in the future. In this way the Christian religion is revealed not only as a moral system, conceived in the perishable forms of the human spirit, but as an eternal, divine power, acting universally in the intellectual world, and its visible action ought to present us with a perpetual lesson. That is the proper meaning of the dogma of faith in one universal Church as expressed in the creed.

In the Christian world everything must necessarily lead towards the establishment of a perfect order on earth and it does contribute to this really; otherwise Our Lord's word would be denied by the facts. He would not be with His Church to the end of time. The new order, God's reign which the redemption was to effect, would not differ from the old order, the reign of evil, which it was supposed to annihilate, and there would still be only this imaginary perfectibility of which philosophy dreams and which each page of history refutes: vain intellectual activity which satisfies only material needs and has always raised man to some

heights only to precipitate him into a more profound abyss.

Come now, you will say, are we not Christians then and is European civilization the only way to become civilized? We are certainly Christians: but are not the Abyssinians, too? Certainly men can be civilized in a way other than the European one; is not Japan civilized even more than Russia, if we can accept the testimony of one of our compatriots? Do you believe that Abyssinian Christianity and Japanese civilization will produce this world order which I discussed before, and which is the ultimate destiny of mankind? Do you believe these absurd aberrations of divine and human truths will cause heaven to descend upon earth?

There are two very distinct things in Christianity: one is its action upon the individual, the other is its action upon universal intelligence. By nature they blend in supreme reason and lead necessarily to the same goal. But our limited point of view could not comprehend the continuity in which the eternal designs of divine wisdom are realized. We must distinguish between the divine action which is manifested at a given time during man's life and that which only takes place in infinity. On the day when the work of redemption will finally be completed, all hearts and all minds will become but one single emotion and one single thought, and all the walls separating people and faiths will crumble. But today each one should realize his particular place in the order of the general Christian vocation, i.e., what are the means which he finds in and around himself for participating in the goal proposed

for the whole human society.

Thus within the society in which this goal ought to be reached there is necessarily a certain circle of ideas in which men's minds are moving, i.e., in which thought revealed from above is to mature and achieve its complete fulfillment. There this circle of ideas, this moral sphere, naturally produces a certain mode of existence and a point of view which, without being precisely the same for each person, yet with reference to us as with reference to all non-European people, forms a similar way of life, a result of this immense intellectual work of eighteen centuries, in which all the passions, all the interests, all the sufferings, all the conceptions, and all the efforts of reason have participated.

All the European nations went hand in hand, as they advanced together throughout the centuries. No matter what each of them may do today to go off in his own particular directions, they always find themselves on the same route. To understand the family development of these people, men need not study history: just read Tasso¹⁹ and see them all prostrate at the foot of Jerusalem's walls. Remember that during fifteen centuries they had only one single idiom with which to address God, only one single moral authority, only one single religious conviction. Imagine that each year on the same day at the same hour in the same words all of them simultaneously raised their voices to the Supreme Being during fifteen centuries, in order to celebrate His glory in the greatest of His good works: admirable symphony, a thousand times more sublime than all the harmonies of the physical world! But, since

this sphere in which the Europeans live—the only one in which humanity can achieve its final destiny—is the result of the influence which religion exercised among them and, if up to now the weakness of our beliefs or the insufficiency of our dogma has placed us outside the universal movement in which the social idea of Christianity was developed and formulated, and if it has relegated us to the category of people who must profit only indirectly and very late from the complete effect of Christendom, then it is clear that impetus must be given to us, for it is Christianity which has produced everything over there. That is what I meant when I said that we have to begin the education of humanity all over again in our country.

The entire history of modern society occurs on the level of beliefs. That is the essence of genuine education. Instituted originally on this basis, education advanced only by means of thought. Interests have always followed ideas there and have never preceded them. So, beliefs have always produced interests and never have interests produced beliefs. All political revolutions were in principle simply moral revolutions. Man sought truth and found liberty and happiness. This approach explains the phenomenon of modern society and its civilization; it cannot be understood in any other way.

Religious persecutions, martyrdoms, propagation of Christianity, heresies, councils: such are the events which fill the first centuries.²⁰ The entire movement of this epoch, including the barbarian invasions, is linked with these efforts of the modern spirit in its infancy.

Formation of the hierarchy, centralization of spiritual power, continued propagation of religion in northern lands, that is what fills the second epoch.²¹ Then comes the exaltation of religious sentiment²² to its supreme degree and the consolidation of religious authority. The philosophical and literary development²³ of the intellect and the culture of moral life under the rule of religion completes this history which can be called sacred, just as much as that of the ancient chosen people. Finally, it is again a religious reaction,²⁴ a new impulse given to the human spirit by religion, which determined the present shape of society. Therefore, the great, or it can be said, the sole interest of modern people, has always centered upon beliefs. All the material, positive, and individual interests were absorbed in that alone.

I know that this prodigious striving of human nature towards its possible perfection has not been admired but, on the contrary, has been called fanaticism and superstition.²⁵ But, no matter what men may say, judge what profound imprint, for better or worse, a social development, wholly produced by one sole emotion, must have left upon the character of these people! Let any superficial philosophy²⁶ shout as much as it likes against the religious wars or against the stakes set on fire by intolerance; as for us, we can only envy the fate of people who, in the clash of convictions, in these bloody conflicts for the cause of truth, have created for themselves a world of ideas which we cannot even imagine—much less transport ourselves there body and soul, as we pretentiously claim we can.

Once more, assuredly all is not reason, virtue, religion in Europe, far from it. But everything is mysteriously dominated by the power which has reigned sovereignly there for a series of centuries; everything is the result of this long chain of events and ideas which has produced the present state of society there. And here is one proof among many: the nation whose features are most strongly delineated, whose institutions are the most permeated by the modern spirit, the English, has in reality only a religious history. Their last revolution,²⁷ to which they owe their liberty and prosperity, as well as the entire series of events since the reign of Henry VIII which caused this revolution, is simply a religious development. In this whole period real political interest appears only as a secondary factor; sometimes it disappears entirely or is sacrificed to that of religious conviction. And as I write these lines,* it is still religious interest which moves this favored land.²⁸ But, generally speaking, how could any European people, if it took the trouble to explore its national consciousness, fail to notice this particular element which, as a holy thought, was constantly the vivifying principle of its history, the soul of its social being?

The workings of Christianity are in no way limited to immediate and direct influence upon men's souls. The gigantic result which it is destined to produce ought to be simply the effect of a multitude of moral, intellectual, social relationships in which the perfect liberty of the human spirit must necessarily be given

* 1829

all possible leeway. So, it is understandable that all that has been done since the first day of our era—or rather since the moment when the Saviour of the world said to His disciples: "Go preach the Gospel to every creature"—together with all the attacks directed against Christianity fits in perfectly with this general idea of its influence. In order to recognize the accomplishment of his prophecies it is enough to note Christ's rule holding sway universally in all hearts, whether accepted consciously or unconsciously, voluntarily or involuntarily. Thus, despite all that is incomplete, vicious, evil, in European society as it stands today, yet it is nonetheless true that God's reign has been realized there in some way, because it contains the principle of indefinite progress and possesses germinally and elementarily all that is needed for God's reign to become established definitely upon earth one day.

Madame, before concluding these reflections on the influence of religion upon society, I am going to reiterate here what I once said about it in a work with which you may not be familiar.

It is certain, I said, that as long as men do not notice the influence of Christianity wherever human thought comes in contact with it in some way or other, even when it is only in order to combat it, they do not have a clear idea about Christianity at all. Wherever Christ's name is pronounced, this mention alone sweeps men along, no matter what they may do. Nothing demonstrates the divine origin of this religion better than this character of absolute universality,

which allows it to infuse itself into men's souls by every possible means and makes it seize men's minds without their knowing it; even when they seem to resist it most it dominates and subjugates them by introducing into the intellect some truths which were not there before, by causing the heart to experience emotions it had never felt, by inspiring us with sentiments which place us, without our knowing it, in the general world-order. So, the function of each individual is determined by Christianity which makes everyone strive towards a single goal. If Christianity is considered from this point of view, each of Christ's prophecies takes on a palpable veracity. Then men clearly perceive the interaction of all the levers which Christ's omnipotent hand sets in motion, in order to lead man to his destiny without violating his freedom or paralyzing any of the powers which are truly his by nature, but, on the contrary, by adding to their intensity and infinitely exalting all their own proper potentialities. In this new economy no moral element remains inactive; the most energetic intellectual talents, as well as the warmest emotional capabilities, and the heroism of a strong soul as well as the abandonment of a submissive spirit, all have a place and an applicability. Accessible to every intelligent creature, associating itself with each pulsation of our heart, whatever it may be, the thought revealed from above carries everything along with it, and grows and strengthens itself even in the face of the obstacles which confront it. In a genius revelation is raised to a height unapproachable by the rest of mankind; in a

timid spirit revelation moves ahead simply by hugging close to the earth and goes forward only step by step; in a meditative mind it is absolute and profound; in a soul dominated by the imagination it is ethereal and fertile in images; in the tender and loving heart it melts into charity and into love; revelation always advances in front of each submissive intellect by filling it with warmth, force, and clarity. See what a diversity of characters, what a multiplicity of powers, it sets in motion; what a variety of different qualities serve but one purpose; what a diversity of hearts beat for but one idea! But the influence of Christianity upon society in general is even more admirable. Roll out the entire picture of development in the new society and you shall see how Christianity transforms all human interests into its own interests, replaces material needs with moral ones everywhere, and in the domain of thought stirs up those great debates without parallel in the history of any other epoch or any other society—those terrible wars based upon religious convictions in which the people's whole life constituted a great idea and unlimited fervor; men will see everything become it and nothing but it, private and public life, family and fatherland, science and poetry, reason and imagination, memories and hopes, joys and sufferings. Within this great movement communicated to the world by God Himself, happy are those who have in their hearts the intimate realization of the effects which they produce; but all are not active instruments, all do not act with awareness; multitudes, inanimate atoms, inert masses, are necessarily moved blindly without recog-

nizing the forces which set them in motion and without perceiving the goal towards which they are driven.

But it is time to come back to you, Madame. I admit that I have trouble detaching myself from these general considerations. It is from the panorama presented my eyes from this height that I gain all my consolation; it is in the sweet belief of man's future happiness that I find refuge; when I am obsessed by the false reality which surrounds me, I feel the need of breathing a purer air and gazing upon a more serene sky. I do not believe, however, that I have wasted your time. It was necessary for you to know the proper way of envisaging the Christian world, and what we Russians have to do in this world. I have probably seemed bitter to you in speaking about our country; however, I have only spoken the truth, and not even the whole truth. Besides, Christian reason does not tolerate any kind of blindness, and least of all, that of national prejudice, since it is the one which divides man the most.

Here is quite a long letter then, Madame, and I believe that both of us must catch our breaths. At the outset I thought that I could tell you what I had to say in a few words. In thinking it over some more, I find that there is enough here for a book. Does it take care of things, Madame? Let me know. But, whatever your answer, you will not be able to avoid a second letter, for we have only begun to broach our subject. In the meantime, I would be very obliged to you if you would consider the prolixity of the first letter as a compensation for the time that I made you wait. I had taken up my pen on the very same day that I received your

letter: then I became completely absorbed in some distressing and fatiguing preoccupations, and I had to get rid of them before putting myself in a frame of mind to talk with you about such serious matters; after that I had to recopy my scribbling which was absolutely indecipherable. This time you will not have to wait a long time: I shall take up my pen again no later than tomorrow.

Necropolis,²⁹ December 1, 1829.