

Leo Tolstoy's Theology of Freedom

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Abstract. Throughout his life, Tolstoy had an abiding interest in religious faith and Christian teaching. His interpretation of faith and the Christian teaching was a supreme manifestation of his love of freedom, which formed its main motive and substance. Tolstoy made a long journey to attain faith, the journey that to him was a search for the meaning of life. Faith as Tolstoy understood it was a way of attaining the "I." Tolstoy's theology of freedom is based on mutually exclusive principles: faith is life in the perspective of infinity; it liberates man from the temporariness of this world and thus of the fear of death; Christianity makes a person free because it is based on the sole truth, love as the essence of God and man; love is the motive force of freedom.

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In his article "Tolstoy's Moral Personality" (2011) Nikolay Lossky singled out an extremely important characteristic of Leo Tolstoy: "From beginning to end Tolstoy comes across as a being that defies all shackles, especially internal ones. Love of freedom is an organic property of his soul, so profound, so basic that it is an element of all his interests and all the solutions of problems that he offers" [8, p. 230]. Undoubtedly, religious faith and the Christian teaching were an object of his special interest throughout his life, albeit to varying degrees. His interpretation of faith and the Christian teaching was a supreme manifestation of his love of freedom, which formed its main motive and substance. Below I will try to validate Lossky's characterization by looking at Tolstoy's ideas of faith and the essence of Christianity and to analyze the relevance of these ideas for us today.

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Faith as the Way toward Infinity

Tolstoy made a long journey in search of faith, the journey, to him, being synonymous with the search for the meaning of life. He described the journey in detail in such works as *Confession* (1879) and *What I Believe* (1882). What needs to be stressed in the context of this article is that in the course of his search Tolstoy consistently subjected to critical analysis all the versions of the answer to the question about the meaning of life and, like Descartes, came to the conclusion that only the *I* exists authentically,¹ but it is a suffering *I*, which has no access to the coveted meaning. Tolstoy scrutinized all the concepts of God, freedom, good and all the previous answers to the question of the meaning of life offered by science, philosophy and religion. He wrote: "Putting aside all the labor of humankind, I wanted to do it all over again by myself and in my own way." As a result the final, ultimate question that remained was this: "Is there any meaning in my life that will not be destroyed by my inevitably approaching death"? Tolstoy gives this ultimate answer to the question: faith is "the knowledge of the meaning of human life, whereby the individual does not destroy himself but lives." This meaning cannot be a teaching provided by science, philosophy or religion because in that case it is merely "the illusory nature of the finite." The meaning that nothing can destroy because it transcends everything can only be the meaning of the infinite: "Every answer of faith gives infinite meaning to the finite existence of man, meaning that is not destroyed by suffering, deprivation, and death" ([18, pp. 37, 16-17, 35], quoted from [19, pp. 63, 35, 61]).

Faith, without which, according to Tolstoy, life is impossible is not the hope that the desired will happen and not the trust in the testimony to the truth, but "inner inevitability of conviction which becomes the foundation of life" [26, p. 795], "a spiritual state," a sense of the infinite. Such faith guides the activity of man, puts him in a certain position in the world and dictates his daily behavior as a result of which he naturally acts "according to it [his position in the world]" ([38, p. 170], quoted from [39]). This faith is never unreasonable, or running counter to existing knowledge, it contains nothing that challenges reason, on the contrary, it explains everything that appears to be unreasonable and contradictory without it [Ibid.].² One cannot disbelieve reason because it is God-given and stems from the infinity which makes faith possible. According to Tolstoy,

Man has not come to the world of his own free will, and therefore must live not according to his own will but according to the will of Him Who has sent him into the world. So that man should know what He Who has sent him into the world wants from him He has endowed him with reason whereby man can always, if he definitely wants to, know the will of God, i.e., what He Who has sent him into the world wants from him... Reason is older and more authentic than any legends and scriptures and it has been given to each of us directly by God ([17, Vol. 72, pp. 527, 529]; letter to V. Zavolokin, 1900).

Faith is the only foundation of human freedom because it liberates one from the fear of death and dependence on finite entities that enslave man: "The spirit is what lives in you, and lives freely and reasonably, and whereof you know nei-

ther the beginning nor the end. Every man feels this in himself" [26, p. 191]. It is the spirit of God in man that gives him the freedom of choice as a manifestation of the true human essence thus making man what he ought to be. In his work *A Brief Summary of the Gospel* Tolstoy thus interprets the words of Jesus about the Kingdom of God:

Every person, apart from their carnal life, apart from being understandably conceived from a carnal father in the womb of a carnal mother, is aware of the spirit within himself that is free, intelligent and independent from the flesh. It is this infinite spirit that has issued from the infinite that is the beginning of everything and that we call God. We know it only within ourselves. This spirit is the beginning of our life and it should be put above everything, one must live by it. By making this spirit the basis of life we attain true, infinite life [15, p. 832] (cf. [22]).

Thus, faith is a person's conscious attitude toward the infinite,³ life in the perspective of infinity. Such a discovery of faith within oneself surely cannot but lead to a wholesale revision of all the values and priorities. The revision should be a veritable repentance that consists in

completely changing my estimate of my own position and activity. Instead of considering our position useful and important, we just acknowledge its harmfulness and triviality; instead of priding ourselves on our education we must admit our ignorance; in place of pride in our kindness and morality we must acknowledge our immorality and cruelty, and instead of our importance admit our insignificance ([41, p. 378], quoted from [40]).

Faith as a sense of the infinite in man is a way of discovering God. Tolstoy repeatedly stressed that one must first discover faith and then God, and not vice versa [18, p. 35]. Discovery of God begins with a feeling of orphanhood and loneliness [Ibid., p. 43], loss of faith in oneself and hope for someone's help, but as long as God remains an external object on which faith is focused He actually distances Himself from the person more and more.⁴ Ultimately, Tolstoy writes, one can find God only in one's soul, but only to the extent that He opens up to the person [33, p. 104],⁵ and find oneself together with God. The quest is never completed, what matters most is constant movement, losses and gains, and at the same time—paradoxical identity of the process and the result⁶ taking place here and now since "the closest proximity to God is the greatest concentration on the present. And vice versa" ([17, vol. 51, p. 46]; diary, 1890).

Tolstoy sought this known and unknowable, close and unreachable God all his life: "What is God? What is He for? God is all the infinite that I know as finite within myself. I am a finite body. God is infinite; I am a being that has existed for 63 years, God is eternal; I am a being that thinks within the limits of my understanding, God thinks infinitely; I am a being that loves a little sometimes, God loves always and infinitely; I am a part, He is all. I cannot understand myself otherwise than as part of Him" ([17, vol. 52, pp. 48-49]; diary, 1891).

These were Tolstoy's words several days before he died: "God is infinite Everything of which man feels to be a finite part. Only God truly exists. Man is

a manifestation of Him in matter, time and space” ([17, vol. 58, p. 143]; diary, 1910). The “I” acquired through faith is part of infinity which is one with God to the extent that man feels God within his soul.⁷

The Christian Truth

Tolstoy himself admitted that he was led to a new religious consciousness by a sense of total loss of the meaning of life and fear of death he had repeatedly experienced on his journey toward faith and was partly linked with episodes similar to the “Arzamas horror.”⁸ It was not a rationalist admission of lack of meaning of life, not a rational search for an acceptable explanation, but “a feeling of the whole being. The difference is between knowing it with one’s head and being led to the edge of an abyss and being horrified at seeing it. It seems to me that this alone leads to true and unshakable faith: only by experiencing the deadliness of *all* the ways other than the only true way can you unshakably adopt the true one” ([17, vol. 50, pp. 161-162]; diary, 1889).

The next step toward “the true unshakable faith” was the conviction that there was no truth in the various church interpretations of Christianity because Christians almost from the beginning were divided among themselves, with each side seeking “to confirm their own truth by ascribing infallibility to themselves” ([28, p. 47], quoted from [27, p. 25]). But for Tolstoy the truth—if it really was the truth—had to be one for all. Accordingly, if every church considers its own truth to be the only one this means that none of them possesses the truth:

Obviously, there has never been one church, there are not one or two but two thousand churches, they all deny one another and merely claim that each of them is the true and only one... Indeed, there are thousands of legends and each denies and berates one another and considers itself to be true: Catholics, Lutherans, Protestants, Calvinists, Shakers, Mormons, Greek Orthodox, Old Believers, Popovtsy, Non-Popovtsy, Molokans, Menonites, Baptists, Skoptsy, Dukhobors etc., etc. all equally claiming that their faith is the only true one and it alone has the holy spirit, that Christ is its head and that all the others are deluded. There are a thousand faiths and each happily considers itself to be the only holy one [26, pp. 10-11].

Tolstoy became convinced that to understand Christianity, “It is only necessary to study the teaching of Jesus in its proper form, as it has come down to us in the words and deeds which are recorded as his own” ([15, p. 814], quoted from [22, p. 19]). In his diary entry of July 21, 1910 Tolstoy, reflecting on how the text of the Gospel should be understood, makes the following remark: “One should read the Gospel and all the books recognized by the Scripture discussing their content in the same way we discuss the content of all the books we read” [17, vol. 58, p. 82]. A thorough study of Christian theology in all its centuries-old diversity was not just the study of the texts, “it was a sudden elimination of all that obscured the meaning of the teaching, that sudden light which showed me the Gospel doctrine in all its simple beauty” ([37, p. 306], quoted from [29]).

Tolstoy constantly repeated that the Christian teaching was “a clear, profound and *simple* (my italics—*E.S.*) teaching on life that meets the highest demands of the human soul” [26, p. 7], and described his confidence in the simplicity of Christianity as “an awesome and joyful truth” [37, p. 357]. The simplicity stems from the fact that the truth of Christianity understood as love of God and one’s neighbor⁹ is a proposition that does not call for any clarifications: “It is one because it is everything” [24, p. 470].¹⁰ This teaching consists in the meaning it attaches to life; it has no mystique, nothing mysterious or arcane, but only the certainty that only in this case can life be good [Ibid.].

The One Commandment

Tolstoy found the one truth of Christianity in the commandment of non-resistance to evil by violence which he had to rediscover “after the eighteen centuries during which the law of Jesus has been professed by millions of human beings, after the eighteen centuries during which thousands of men had consecrated their lives to the study of this law” ([37, p. 335], quoted from [29]). This is not the right place to discuss Tolstoy’s teaching on non-violence. But I would like to draw the reader’s attention to *how* Tolstoy formulates his concept of non-violence as the essence of Christianity: “It is as if someone, vainly seeking to make sense of a pile of broken bits of marble and following a false model, suddenly guesses, from the largest bit, that it is a totally different statue and, starting to build anew, instead of the former incongruities as he observes the outlines of each fragment, finds that all fit well together and form one consistent whole” [37, p. 306].

Tolstoy writes that verse 39 of chapter 5 of Matthew gave him the key to the whole teaching of Christ and stresses what to him was the most important thing: “I understood that Jesus meant *neither more nor less than what he said* (my italics—*E. S.*)” ([37, p. 310], quoted from [29]). Therefore, Tolstoy was convinced that one should not try to interpret the Gospel but one should try to understand precisely what was written¹¹ This is the point at which Tolstoy’s “conversion” occurs. Thereafter all the former ideas cease to matter and a spiritual rebirth takes place: “As soon as I understood these words in a simple and straightforward way, the way they were said, immediately in the whole teaching of Christ, not only in the Sermon on the Mount but in all the Gospels, everything that was confused became clear, what was contradictory became coherent; and most importantly, what seemed superfluous became necessary. Everything formed a single whole and undoubtedly confirmed one another” [37, pp. 311-312].

Non-violence equals love and love is God and the only thing man can know about God ([17, vol. 77, p. 102]; letter to E. Pospelova, 1907). Faith in God living in the human soul and, through Christ, telling man how he should live according to God’s will, is the sole condition of following the non-violence commandment [33, p. 115]. Tolstoy is sure that one does not need supernatural help

to follow this commandment; it is well within human capacity [37, p. 313], being a clear, definite, important and realizable rule [ibid., p. 365].¹² As Abdusalam Guseynov writes, “there is no other way to get rid of violence than refusing to commit it, and nothing can prevent a person who has become aware of this truth, from following it if he/she has decided to do so” [5, p. 12]. Non-violence means not considering oneself to be different from all the other people of whatever faith, race, ethnicity, etc. [37, p. 365]. Non-violence means complying with God’s will,¹³ which consists in people loving one another and thus treating others as you would like others to treat you. Faith in the love commandment makes man capable of non-resistance to evil by violence and this is possible when man knows God in himself: “We cognize Him only from the side which he opens to us. He opens to us as love. So, even though our knowledge of Him is far from complete, from the side of Him with which he opens to us we undoubtedly know about His existence and about His property that we are aware of in ourselves and about what He wants from us” [33, p. 106].

In an unsent letter to Nikolay Strakhov (November 1879) Tolstoy confessed: “In Christ’s teaching I found one particular feature that distinguishes him from all other teachings. He instructs and explains why the meaning of our life is what He gives it. But he always says that one should follow what He says and then one will see whether what He says is true” [17, vol. 62, p. 502].

For Tolstoy the identity of faith and deeds¹⁴ flows from the very essence of the non-violence commandment which expresses the whole meaning of Christ’s teaching because non-violence implies action: replacement of evil and violence with kindness and accord ([17, vol. 73, p. 77]; letter to N. Krastin, 1901):

If a man believes that violence is necessary, believes religiously, such a man will commit violence not for the sake of good consequences he expects from violence, but only because he believes. If on the other hand a man believes in the law of love he will similarly follow the bidding of love and refrain from acts that defy the law of love regardless of any other considerations about the consequences, but solely because he believes and therefore cannot act otherwise [25, pp. 94-95].

But such action is possible, *first*, only thanks to faith which is the only cause of good deeds, and good deeds, in turn, are inevitable consequences of faith [36, p. 244]. Therefore “ask not what is more important: faith or good deeds? It is like asking what is more important, the Sun or its light?” [Ibid.]. As Guseynov notes, “faith is coextensive with what a person does. It is unfolded in his actions, is a kind of thread on which acts are strung” [5, p. 11].

Second, the act of non-violence is natural, flowing as it does from love which has become a life force showing man what and how he should do:

People who believe in the life path are, in the words of Christ, like springs of fresh water, that is, a spring from an underground source. All their deeds are like the flow of water which flows everywhere in spite of any obstacles in its way. A person who believes Christ’s teaching can no more ask what he should do than a spring of water from underground. It flows filling the earth, grass, trees, birds, animals and people [24, p. 471].

To believe in God as love people only need to believe in what really exists, in what one cannot help believing [33, p. 110]. Following God in love means doing good, which gives man genuine freedom and life:

He who will do good will know the truth, and he who knows the truth will be free from evil and from death. For whoever is deluded becomes a servant of his delusion. Just as a servant does not always live in the master's house while the son is always in the house, so a man who has lost his way and becomes a servant of his delusions does not live forever, but dies. Only he who is in the truth remains alive always. The truth is in being not a servant, but a son. So if you are deluded you will be servants, unfree, and will die. But if you are in the truth you will be free sons and will live [26, p. 502].

Tolstoy is aware that faith in love which has no external expression, and worship of God that is not defined by any form, time and place seem to be unclear and even dubious to most people. At the same time even a person convinced of the validity of his faith would find it hard not to question it "when he learns that other people are just as confident of the truth of their faiths and consider his faith to be false" [33, pp. 104, 105]. The way out of this contradiction, which, as shown above has, according to Tolstoy, destroyed the truth of church Christianity,¹⁵ consists in recognizing love to be the one object of faith and the one principle of life common to all people: "Believing in all this... that God is love and that our soul is His manifestation... we converge in our faith with the best people all over the world, the wise men of China, India, Ancient Greece, Rome, etc. Believing in the dogmas of *our* church: in sacraments, icons, relics and miracles, we diverge not only from the whole mankind, but from many Christian denominations" ([17, vol. 77, p. 118]; letter to hieromonach Arseny, 1907).

A man who recognizes love as the object of faith shared by all cannot have any doubts about its truth [33, p. 105], and Christianity focused on love as the foundation of love is in agreement with all the main provisions of all the religions and, like all these doctrines, is simple, understandable and concise [38, p. 190]. The common commandment whose main provisions are the same in all the religions owing to the unity of human nature,¹⁶ according to Tolstoy, "determine man's attitude to God as a part to the whole; derives from this attitude the mission of man which consists in increasing the divine quality in himself; the mission of man is to derive practical rules from the rule that commands treating others as you would like them to treat you" [38, p. 191].

This is what God-given reason, which is the same for all people, demands from them. Reason unites people—those who are close and those who are gone, the living and the yet-to-be born—in their ability to love one another:

Thus we use everything that has been produced by the reason of Isaiah, Christ, Buddha, Socrates and Confucius, all the people who lived before us and believed in reason and served it. Treat others as you would like others to treat you, do not take revenge on the people who have done evil to you, and pay with good for evil, be abstemious, virtuous, not only do not kill people, but do not be angry with them, be at peace with every-

one, and much else, all these are products of reason and all this has been equally preached by Buddhists, Confucians, Christians, and Taoists, by Greek and Egyptian sages and all the good men of our time ([17, vol. 72, p. 528]; letter to V. Zavolokin, 1900).

Loneliness in Faith

N. Lossky wrote: "In the conditions of a human life, an infinitesimal part of the infinitely large world, the exercise of freedom is one of the most difficult tasks; that is why he who is acutely aware of the need for freedom experiences suffering every minute from clashes with the world" [8, p. 230; 44]. These words aptly describe the other side of Tolstoy's inner freedom in faith, and that is doubts about one's own sincerity, the need to win over like-thinking people, disappointment in one's hopes and a sense of infinite loneliness. From the outset, Tolstoy sought to make sure that the motives that led him to voice his convictions publicly were genuine, fearing vanity, pride and self-deception ([17, vol. 63, p. 80]; letter to V. Alekseyev, 1881). He was very well aware of the danger of confusing two motives—activity for God and for worldly fame—because it is hard to tell one from the other: "Sometimes it happens that you feel that you believe in what you do not believe and sometimes, vice versa, you think that you do not believe in what you believe" ([17, vol. 65, p. 162]; letter to E. Popov, 1890). He lamented the fact that there were not enough people who shared his faith because he wished to submit his convictions to the judgment of his co-religionists ([17, vol. 85, p. 223]; letter to V. Chertkov, 1885). He constantly looked for instances of true faith among the multitude of people with whom he communicated becoming enchanted and disenchanted with them.¹⁷ He stressed that he had no teaching of his own different from Christ's teaching [23, p. 114], which in turn, being a movement from man to God, does not contain and cannot contain any laws and rules and before which "every degree of perfection and every degree of imperfection" are equal ([28, p. 79], quoted from [27, p. 43]).

There is ample evidence of the astonishment and indignation people both close to and distant from him felt about Tolstoy's views after his conversion. Aleksandra Tolstaya, a close friend and at the same time opponent of his religious views, delivered this verdict: "He sought God, but without humility, and found only himself, that is, a new and distorted code which he has invented and which he cherishes and is *proud* of precisely because he has worked it out himself" [42, p. 533]. Ioann of Kronstadt, a fierce opponent of Tolstoy, wrote: " 'Me, and nobody else but me,' dreams Tolstoy. 'You are all deluded: I have discovered the truth and I am teaching the truth to all people!' " [7, p. 367]. Mikhail Novosyolov, initially a follower and later a fierce critic, addressed this charge to Tolstoy: "Your God is only your pet idea which you have nourished turning it from side to side for two decades. You can never break out of the vicious circle of your 'I' " [11, p. 381]. On June 15, 1881 Konstantin Pobedonostsev, Chief Procurator of the Holy Synod, in a message to Tolstoy responding to his petition for a pardon for the assassins of Emperor Alexander II, wrote: "Upon reading your letter

I see that your faith is one and my church faith is different and that our Christ is not your Christ" [17, vol. 63, p. 59]. Tolstoy's wife Countess Sofia Tolstaya wrote about her arguments with him over the publication of his works: "I would have thought that God, such as I believed in, would not care whether it is I or Sytin and Suvorin who sell the works of Tolstoy" [14, p. 134].

As I have said above, Tolstoy arrived at his understanding of faith after he became convinced that it was futile to follow anyone else's path. Sure enough, he was very well aware of the angry feelings his views evoked among some people and he could not help responding to them:

The whole point of my writings is that I am expressing *my* personal faith... I am often surprised by the irritation my confession of faith evokes... My friends, even my family, are turning away from me. Some—the liberals and aesthetes—think I am a nitwit or imbecile like Gogol; others—revolutionaries, radicals—think I am a mystic and a chatterbox; government people think I am a vicious revolutionary; Orthodox believes think I am the devil. I confess that it gives me a heavy heart ([17, vol. 63, p. 201]; letter to A. Tolstaya, 1884).

Even so, as A. Guseynov rightly points out, Tolstoy "would never have agreed that his judgments had the status of an opinion, just one of many points of view" [5, p. 10]. There are at least two reasons for that. *First*, Tolstoy was totally convinced that his personal journey toward faith, for all its uniqueness, was at the same time universal. He wrote: "I am so firmly convinced that what is true for me is true for all people that the question as to when and what people will arrive at this truth does not interest me" ([17, vol. 85, p. 60]; letter to V. Chertkov, 1884).¹⁸ Universality was a fundamental property of his faith because the infinite whose presence man feels in his soul through faith, and of which he is a part is one for all. His conviction that faith carries universal meaning for all people steadily grew stronger and broadened to include the whole mankind as Tolstoy became convinced that he was not alone in interpreting the Gospel as the answer to the question about the meaning of life:

This answer to the question about the meaning of life was more or less clearly given by all the best people both before and after the Gospel, beginning from Moses, Joshua, Confucius, the Ancient Greeks, Buddha, Socrates to Pascal, Spinoza, Fichte, Feuerbach and all those often obscure and unglorified people who sincerely thought and spoke about the meaning of life, without borrowing any ready-made teachings [16, p. 119].

The unity of religions consists in the principle that governs the relations among people and not in the specific content of the teachings which may be widely different. It was this—and not his exclusive right to possessing the truth—that Tolstoy passionately upheld when he wrote: "I am not saying that I am alone in possession of the truth and that all who think otherwise are deluded, but I am asking all others to treat me likewise" ([17, vol. 80, p. 83]; letter to M. Dondukova-Korsakova, 1909).

Second, because, according to Tolstoy, faith and deeds are identical, as has been shown above, from the time he was converted he perceived his activity as

a mission deeming it impossible for himself not to speak out on faith for fear of being misunderstood and challenging “the reigning faith” ([17, Vol. 63, p. 200]; letter to A. Tolstaya, 1884). Since every person following Christ as the messenger of truth also has to be a messenger ([17, Vol. 85, p. 136]; letter to V. Chertkov, 1885), a person must seek his goal like a flying stone and rejoice in the fact that “he is flying and knows that it, the stone, is nothing and flight is everything” ([17, Vol. 63, p. 207]; letter to N. Gue (son), 1885). This sense of mission sprang from the conviction that all people were essentially the same, which is why the enhanced faith of one person is a condition of enhanced faith of all people ([17, Vol. 52, p. 116]; diary, 1894). Citing Lao-Tzu, Tolstoy wrote: “To attain the grand, man must do small deeds; yet believe that not only his own salvation but that of the whole world lies in small deeds... One must believe in the vastness of this deed” ([17, Vol. 87, p. 223]; letter to V. Chertkov, 1893).

Faith as Freedom

Tolstoy traversed a long and arduous path toward his faith—from the dream of founding his own religion through passionate negation of the common ideas of faith through repudiation of the people who disagreed with him to the firm conviction that true faith implies tolerance of other faiths. He arrived at this view after dealing with an incredible number of people, both those who understood and accepted his convictions and those who totally rejected them. He wrote: “I am very happy that I have become truly tolerant of all faiths. I have been taught by people who are not faith-tolerant” ([17, vol. 54, p. 163]; diary, 1903). Eventually he realized that every person has the faith that accords with his/her mind and heart, such that it is impossible to demand that people should believe based on somebody else's directions. In fact, when faith is the result of a strictly individual journey, it is obvious that the advantage of freedom and independence when translating this faith to others turns out to be a constraint. In other words, then, one has to translate and share individual experience along with faith, and that is hardly possible. An entry in Tolstoy's diary dated February 11, 1908 has these words: “One cannot impart and convey a religious world view to another person... One can only provide material for shaping a world view, while it is up to the person to pick from it what is necessary” ([17, vol. 56, p. 311]; notebook, 1908). And this is what he wrote about it to A. Tolstaya (1903) who was for many years one of his main opponents in the religious arguments:

It is a truth that has long been known but it is only recently that I understood it in my heart that a person's faith (again, if it is sincere) cannot diminish his virtues and my love for that person. Since then I have stopped wishing to convey my faith to others and felt that I love people without any regard for their faith and attack only those who are insincere, hypocrites who do not believe in what they preach [17, vol. 74, pp. 48-49].

What, then, was Tolstoy's faith? (for more detail, see [13]). In the existential sense, a person's faith is the person, the foundation on which that person's life is

built that enables him to develop. Every person has his/her own support point: "It all depends on the weight of the demands of his heart and reason" ([17, vol. 58, p. 30]; diary, 1910). Faith is the only means of acquiring one's true Self: "Faith is merely consciousness of one's own position, a position not above and, still more important, not below, not more lowly than it is" ([17, vol. 86, p. 281]; letter to V. Chertkov, 1889). Such faith is formed through complex spiritual processes that defy verbal expression and that link man with God, a link that cannot tolerate any external interference. Such faith obliges every truly faithful person to respect the sincere faith of other people and not to interfere with it. "If I ever departed from that rule, Tolstoy writes, I repent with all my heart and ask forgiveness of those whose feeling I have insulted thereby" ([17, vol. 79, p. 241]; draft of a letter to an unknown addressee, 1909).

The essence of such faith is love as the "reliable life path" [8, p. 237]. A person who "has come to believe one's divine essence" and following that path has transported his/her life to "the realm of freedom and continuous joy" [21, p. 643]. In this realm, freedom from the fear of death is possible and one can say about it: "I am, I never begin anywhere and I never end anywhere" [31, p. 400].

Tolstoy's faith was absolutely complete in that all the constituent questions and answers existed and developed in unison with one another and ultimately converged in one point. The key feature of that convergence is that simplicity because the state of faith, being a means of keeping infinity in the present, may imply nothing but this content, which can be articulated within the fleeting present moment before it is gone. Tolstoy made an interesting note in his diary (1906):

A thought struck me yesterday that writing, and still more printing, were the main cause of the perversion of true faith discovered by the great founders of religions... All the major religions were spread by word of mouth. It seems to me that this is the only way in which true religion can be spread. And not so much orally as not through writing, not through printing, but through life and the part of life that is oral peaching... When spread through life and oral preaching the truth is always tested by the preacher's life and any mistaken word or expression passes without a trace; what remains is its sincerity, and it alone is the true guide of true faith [17, vol. 55, pp. 239-240].

"At the same time this content—love—is "the manifestation of divine essence for which there is no time, which is why love manifests itself only in the present, now, at any minute of the present" [34, p. 336]. This faith is hard to fix in any final form because it is essentially constant movement from oneself to God in which there can be no fixed laws and rules [28, p. 79], and Christian commandments are, "as it were, signposts on the endless road to perfection, toward which humanity is moving" ([28, p. 80]; quoted from [27, p. 44]).¹⁹ The faith Tolstoy arrived at is life itself, or rather, the condition of life that is as inevitable as breathing ([17, vol. 79, p. 155]; letter to A. Alyokhin, 1909), "freedom to live in this world as sons and not as slaves... freedom to live by the present" [26, p. 555].

For Tolstoy, Christianity as the content of faith is the embodiment of freedom because it cannot "be imposed on men; it can only be freely assimilated"

([28, p. 146], quoted from [27, p. 81]). Christianity is the truth that makes man free,²⁰ owing to which “freedom is an inalienable possession of the Christian” ([28, p. 166], quoted from [27, p. 93]). A Christian may be a victim of external violence, and may be deprived of freedom, he may be in bondage to his passions “but he cannot be in bondage in the sense of being forced by any threat of external harm to perform an act that is against his conscience” ([28, p. 167], quoted from [27, p. 93]).

Thus, Tolstoy’s theology of freedom is based on the following inter-connected principles. Faith is a means of living in the perspective of infinity which liberates man from the temporariness of this world and thereby from the fear of death. Christianity makes a person free because it is based on the sole truth: love as the essence of God and man. Love is the motive force of freedom because it alone rids man of dependence on everything external and makes it possible to live following only the internal divine law.

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Notes

- ¹ Tolstoy wrote in 1875: “I don’t know how accurate is Descartes’ expression ‘I think, therefore I am’ but I know that if I say ‘I know [*one thing is clear*] *above all myself that I live*’ it cannot be inaccurate. The first knowledge is the knowledge of my combination from (sic!—E. S.) the rest of the world. That combination we call life” [32, p. 351].
- ² I will not delve into Tolstoy’s interpretation of the concept of “reason” as this is a separate major topic much written about by many authors. Let me just note that accusing Tolstoy of rationalism (see, for example, [2]) is totally groundless because Tolstoy did not follow the traditional reason-feeling and rational-irrational dichotomy: for him reason was the only and natural God-given method of perceiving life. For more on the relationship between faith and reason with Tolstoy see [3]. Explaining the challenge of translating Tolstoy’s term *razumenie* into English Inessa Medzhibovskaya writes that the term includes consciousness, ability and will [9, p. 201].

- ³ Friedrich Schleiermacher with his "religion is sense and taste for the Infinite" comes closest to Tolstoy's interpretation of faith. "The contemplation of the pious," wrote Schleiermacher, "is the immediate consciousness of the universal existence of all finite things, in and through the Infinite, and of all temporal things in and through the Eternal... religion is not knowledge and science, either of the world or of God. Without being knowledge, it recognizes knowledge and science. In itself it is an affection, a revelation of the Infinite in the finite, God being seen in it and it in God" [12, pp. 39, 36-37]. In his article "What Is Religion and of What Does Its Essence Consist?" Tolstoy writes about Schleiermacher as one of the people who "do not lack the faculty of higher (i.e., religious) consciousness, which distinguishes man from the animals" ([38, p. 161], quoted from [39]). Cf. Tolstoy's definition: "True religion is that relationship, in accordance with reason and knowledge, which man establishes with the infinite world around him, and which binds his life to that infinity and guides his actions" ([38, p. 163], quoted from [39]).
- ⁴ "And again, isolated from me and from the world, God would melt away before my eyes like a piece of ice" ([18, p. 45], quoted from [19, p. 73]).
- ⁵ In his work *Path of Life* Tolstoy writes: "You can find God only within you. Until you find God within yourself, you will not find Him anywhere." And further: "You can easily feel God within yourself. But you cannot know God or define what God is—it is impossible... and unnecessary" ([24, pp. 60, 68], quoted from [35, pp. 28, 32]).
- ⁶ Moses said to God: "Where can I find you?" God said: "If you are looking for me, you have already found me" [20, p. 136].
- ⁷ Many critics have defined such definition of God as Pantheism. Vasily Zenkovsky wrote, for example: "Yes, immortality is a problem of the individual—Tolstoy started and never abandoned this; but in his enthusiasm for Pantheism he recognized as immortal what in a personality is impersonal, universal and divine" [43, p. 517]. It has to be noted that this utterance is a typical example of interpretation of Tolstoy's views in terms of an entirely different philosophical tradition using established terminology while ignoring the features of his own position.
- ⁸ Tolstoy was very reticent in describing his experience in Arzamas in a letter to Sofia Tolstaya of September 4, 1869: "I was suddenly overcome with such anxiety, fear and horror the likes of which I had never experienced... and may God forbid anyone from experiencing" [17, vol. 83, p. 167]. A more colorful description is contained in "Notes of a Madman" [30].
- ⁹ "To love God within oneself means to seek the highest perfection in love and to love God in other people means to recognize in every person the same God that lives in me and therefore treat every person not as you would like to be treated yourself but as God who lives in all people wants" [33, p. 108].
- ¹⁰ It has to be stressed that Tolstoy's "simplicity" was the result of profound knowledge of contemporary critical studies of the New Testament, above all the works of the Tübingen Evangelical School which applied the historical approach to the Bible—Ferdinand Baur, David Strauß, Ernest Renan, Eduard Reuss and others whom he read in the original. Tolstoy, stressing the fact that the century-old European tradition of Bible critique was little-known in Russia due to censorship was nevertheless sure that to study Christianity without taking into account scientific achievements was "like saying that the Sun rotates around the Earth in the previous century" [15, p. 805]. Besides, in his Gospel studies Tolstoy drew on various other authors: the Anglican theologian Frederic Farrar, the Orthodox theologian Vasily Grechulevich, the German Bible scholar Konstantin von Tischendorf and others. On the whole Tolstoy's assessment of Bible scholars was rather critical. He called them "men of imagined science" [26, p. 403]. Tolstoy wrote this about Bible critique in a letter to Mikhail Novosyolov (1886): "He who cannot find the main thing in

the Gospel with his heart will not learn it through any study. And he who can does not need it" [17, vol. 63, pp. 390-391].

- ¹¹ "To understand the Christian teaching as it is in reality the main thing is not to interpret the Gospels but to understand them as they have been written" [23, p. 113].
- ¹² Tolstoy thus formulates this rule: "To make no distinction between compatriots and foreigners, and to abstain from all the results of such distinction, from hostility towards foreigners, from wars, from all participation in war, from all preparations for war; to establish with all men, of whatever nationality, the same relations granted to compatriots" ([37, pp. 365-366], quoted from [292]).
- ¹³ Tolstoy writes in a letter to A. Vlasov of February 18, 1900: "But if we adhere only to what agrees with the reason of every man, to wit, that we came into this world not of our own free will and will not leave it of our own will, but of some higher will and that therefore we should live in this world according to that will which has led us into the world and will lead us out of it. And as our reason tells us, that will is that we should love one another and treat others as we would like others to treat us" [17, vol. 72, pp. 318-319].
- ¹⁴ "Faith is man's awareness that his position in the world obliges him to perform certain actions" ([38, p. 170], quoted from [39]).
- ¹⁵ "Even I, who had supposed that the truth lay in a union of love, was forced to recognize that the teachings of doctrine destroy the very thing they set out to produce" ([18, p. 54], quoted from [19, p. 86]).
- ¹⁶ "All faiths have the same foundations. And it cannot be otherwise: man is the same everywhere" ([17, vol. 56, p. 15]; diary, February 13, 1907).
- ¹⁷ Tolstoy's mixed feelings about the movement of Tolstoyans is well-known. See [10; 1].
- ¹⁸ In a letter to the Reverend V. Vladimirov of December 22, 1903 Tolstoy writes: "If a believed something I had invented myself I would understand the exhortation not to believe my inventions and would recognize what the whole world recognizes. But I believe what the whole world believes and you believe, I believe in God our Father who has sent me into the world so that I fulfil His will" [17, vol. 74, p. 263].
- ¹⁹ On Tolstoy's "theology of perfection" see [6]. Maria Gelfond writes this about the link between perfection and freedom: "If freedom is only possible for man as self-perfection to which the content of the highest moral law of life obliges us, then this very law is nothing but the law of freedom" [4, p. 260].
- ²⁰ "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). Tolstoy repeatedly refers to and interprets this verse.

Translated by Yevgeny Filippov