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## Leo Tolstoy's Faith: The Equivalence of State of Mind and Content

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*This article discusses Tolstoy's faith in the unity of its two aspects: as the state of mind of its carrier and in terms of its content and the life principles that flow from it. It is shown that at the same time and in the same respect Tolstoy was the bearer of the faith and its investigator; therefore, its adequate interpretation is possible only if the principles established by him for himself are taken into account instead of an abstract and outward interpretation of what faith should be. The article considers, first, Tolstoy's explanation of faith in various works, letters, diaries, and the like during the last thirty years of his life; and second, his distinctive expressions of faith along with discussions of it. The article demonstrates the equivalence of Tolstoy's state of mind and the content of his faith, as well as its purely individual character. The study concludes with a discussion of the significance of Tolstoy's understanding of faith for us today.*

**Keywords:** Leo Tolstoy, faith, Christianity, non-violence, tolerance, individualism.

### Introduction: The “Undiscovered” Tolstoy

THE PROBLEM of the consistency and/or the rupture between Tolstoy's artistic and religio-philosophic oeuvre and the essence of his spiritual crisis has long evoked enormous controversy.<sup>1</sup> At-

1. In Western scholarship on Tolstoy a new wave of interest in the second period of his creative work (1880–1910) has appeared in recent decades. Among works related in one way or another to the topic of the present article, the following are noteworthy: Gustafson 1986 (Russian translation: Gustafson 2003); McLean 2008; Medzhibovskaya 2009; Medzhi-

tempts to understand this process arose among Tolstoy's contemporaries and from the beginning gave rise to mutually exclusive opinions. On the one hand, Semyon Frank, as well as many others, wrote that Tolstoy, like other "twice-born" natures, lived through the repudiation of the old and a spiritual revolution (Frank 2000, 547). On the other hand, Georgy Florovsky questioned the authenticity of the turning point in Tolstoy's life and asserted: "There was no birth of a 'new man.' There was no mystical revelation, no encounter, no breakthrough. And there was no change in his views" (Florovskii 2000, 677). To this day the view expressed in Tolstoy's time by many Russian philosophers is extremely widespread: Tolstoy was a brilliant writer and a mediocre thinker (See Gel'fond 2010) (a "multi-talented artist" and "an utterly non-talented philosopher" in the words of Nikolai Fedorov [Fedorov 2000, 193]). According to Semyon Frank, "the former enjoyed boundless recognition, [but] the latter was almost universally and unconditionally dismissed" (Frank 2000, 299).<sup>2</sup>

The reasons for such ambivalent attitudes are extremely varied, but they can be explained in a most general way, in my view, by the extraordinary scale of the tasks which Tolstoy set himself as a spiritual reformer. These tasks are not easy to comprehend adequately, a situation that often leads to the rise of a simple explanatory scheme based on the principle of "either-or." Following Olga Sedakova (2014, 37), one may observe that until now the "astonishing undiscovered-ness" of Tolstoy has held sway in Russia for numerous reasons (see also Guseinov 2018, 19). The positive assessment of Tolstoy the artist and the negative view of Tolstoy the thinker have been reinvigorated today in the renewed debate over the Holy Synod's Edict of February 20–22, 1901, on Tolstoy's defection from the Church, and in discussion of problems that arose in connection with Tolstoy's attitude toward Orthodoxy (See Orekhanov, 2010). Moreover and paradoxically, until recently most of Tolstoy's religio-philosophical works remained largely inaccessible to the majority of Russian readers, as many of these writings had only recently or never been reissued, and as the ninety-volume *Complete Collected Works* had become a bibliographical rarity.<sup>3</sup>

bovskaya 2019; Orwin 1993 (Russian translation: Orwin 2006); Paperno 2014 (Russian translation: Paperno 2018). In Russian scholarship the following are particularly significant: Guseinov 2008; Guseinov and Shchedrina 2014; Guseinov 2018; Zorin 2020.

2. In Russia today, Archpriest Georgii Orekhanov defends the image of Tolstoy as a mediocre thinker, maintaining that Tolstoy in his philosophical treatises was unable to offer a "complete religious doctrine" (Orekhanov 2016).
3. This state of affairs changed radically once an electronic version of the ninety-volume *Complete Collected Works of L. N. Tolstoy* appeared (<http://tolstoy.ru/creativity/90-volume-collection-of-the-works/>).

This article considers Tolstoy's faith, taking into account the unity of its two aspects: first, as the *state of mind* (*sostoianie*) of its bearer, his inner sense, which was for him identical to life as such; and second, as its *content* (*soderzhanie*), that is, what it contained and what sort of life principles it consequently entailed. For thirty years (1879–1910) Tolstoy wrote of his faith in various genres — essays, journalistic works, letters, diaries, and notebooks — and his conception, while remaining true to his original inspiration, was continuously changed, clarified, and deepened.<sup>4</sup> Maria Gel'fond, speaking of the importance of this topic to Tolstoy, notes: "It would not be an exaggeration to state that all his philosophical and theological essays were devoted to one extent or another to the problem of faith" (Gel'fond 2009, 65). This article explores Tolstoy's understanding of faith as a process, one distinguished by its exceptional consistency and wholeness, thanks to the unity of several of its components: first, faith was the foundation of human existence; second, the Christian teaching of nonviolence was its content; and third, from this content principles of everyday behavior flowed. The main purpose of this article lies in proving this unity.

Before examining Tolstoy's faith in the unity of its existential and objective aspects, let me make several preliminary remarks. First, Tolstoy simultaneously and in one and the same relation *experienced* faith and *described* it for himself and the audience, that is, he was at once both faith's bearer and its investigator. Therefore, an interpretation of Tolstoy's faith is simultaneously an interpretation of his understanding of faith, and makes sense only when it takes into account the principles he established for himself and does not proceed from any abstract and external concept of faith whatsoever, especially since Tolstoy's concept of faith has almost no analogue in the history of human thought. Second, it is well-known that Tolstoy's discovery of faith resulted in a radical change in the author's life. In a letter to Alexandra Tolstoy on February 2–3, 1880, he bore witness to this: "Everything that I knew before, everything was turned upside down, and everything that was upside down before, was turned right side up" (Tolstoy 1935–58, 63:8). This admission sums up the unique place finding faith had for Tolstoy in his creative work and life. I shall consider below Tolstoy's conception of faith drawing exclusive-

4. Unfortunately, the scope of this article does not permit a detailed examination of the evolution of Tolstoy's conceptions of faith nor a detailed delineation of these changes and clarifications.

ly on his own statements or on their exposition in a form as close as possible to the original.

### **The Problem of the Articulation of Faith**

One of Tolstoy's earliest attempts at a *profession de foi* is contained in a letter to Alexandra Tolstoy of April-May 1859, in which he recalls his sentimental adolescent faith, which subsequently collapsed, but in its place an "inner (*umstvennaia*) exaltation" emerged, which even then (1852–53) had led to thoughts of immortality and love. He wrote: "These revelations surprised me with their similarity to the Christian religion, and instead of exploring these ideas myself, I began to seek them out in the Gospel but found little" (Tolstoy 1935–58, 60:293). And here Tolstoy formulates his most important "methodological" principle: "Moreover, for me life shapes religion; religion does not shape life" (294). This means that the starting and ending point on the path to faith was himself and his unique, lived experience. Tolstoy spoke of this numerous times and at the end of his life expressed it thus: "The main and in essence the only question of human life is just this, How shall I live? That is, What shall I do? To answer this question, one needs to know who one is" (Tolstoy 1935–58, Letter to P. P. Sokolov, April 11, 1910, 81:222–3).

This path of self-discovery was long and gradual, and there were several important stops during its first stage. The first was a turn toward other people's experience in the form of scientific theories, philosophical teachings, and religious doctrines, which Tolstoy studied attentively and then rejected, a process described in detail in the author's religio-philosophical works of 1879–84. It is important here to point out the reasons for this rejection, which I believe consist of the following: first, in Tolstoy's view, scientific knowledge by its very nature cannot pose the question of the meaning of life. Second, philosophical concepts, although they acknowledge the validity of the question itself, cannot actually answer it because the task of "true philosophy," according to Tolstoy, lies only in posing the question, not answering it; thus, "instead of an answer [one obtains] the same question but in a more complex form" (Tolstoy 1935–58, "A confession," 23:20). And finally, with respect to the Christian religion as traditionally understood, the main problem for Tolstoy was that each denomination proclaimed itself as the sole truth, denying this truth to all others and thereby creating an insoluble contradiction. In Tolstoy's words:

If one takes any twig from a sprawling bush, it would be completely just to say that from twig to twig, from twig to branch, and from branch to root, each twig comes from the stem, but no one twig is the sole offshoot. All are alike. To say that any twig is the one true twig would be absurd (Tolstoy 1935–58, “The four Gospels harmonized and translated,” 24:11).

The second stop was the deep emotional stress connected to a sense of utter loss of the meaning of life and of the fear of death, similar to the “Arzamas horror.”<sup>5</sup> What is important here is that, as Tolstoy himself acknowledged, it was neither a reasoned recognition of the absence of meaning in life that brought him to this new religious consciousness, nor a rational quest for an acceptable explanation, but

the feeling of [one’s] whole being. The difference is this — to recognize with the mind or to be brought to the abyss and to be appalled, having seen it. It seems to me that only this leads to true unshakable faith: only having experienced the perdition of *all* paths, besides the one true path, will you stand unwaveringly on what is true (Tolstoy 1935–58, Diary, October 24, 1889, 50:161–2).

In a diary entry on October 24, 1889, Tolstoy acknowledged that there may be other, positive paths for “more sensitive and pure natures” (1935–58, 50:162), including revelation, but Tolstoy’s case followed a negative path, resulting not so much from love for the truth but rather from the consciousness of the futility and even destructiveness of all other paths.

Consequently, Tolstoy, like Descartes,<sup>6</sup> became convinced that only one’s own “self” truly exists, but it is a suffering “self,” deprived of access to the meaning of life, as it subjected all concepts related to this — concepts of God, freedom, good — to logical investigation, and they did not withstand the critique of reason. After the consistent rejection of all variants of the answer to the meaning of life previously attained by humanity, Tolstoy found himself alone with himself, and a last

5. Tolstoy gave a very restrained description of his experience in a letter to S. A. Tolstoy dated September 4, 1869: “I suddenly was filled with despair, fear, and horror such as I had never experienced [. . .] and God grant may no one experience” (Tolstoy 1935–58, 83:167). A more graphic description is found in “The Memoirs of a Madman.”
6. In 1875 in the work “On the soul and its life outside the life known and comprehensible to us,” Tolstoy wrote: “I do not know how accurate Descartes’ statement is: ‘I think, therefore I am [literally, “I live” — Trans.];’ but I do know that if I were to say, ‘I know [undoubtedly only] myself first and foremost, then, that I am [literally, “I live” — Trans.]’ — this cannot be wrong” (Tolstoy 1935–58, 17:351).

question remained, “the simplest question, lying in the soul of each person, from the simple baby to the wisest old man” (Tolstoy 1935–58, “A confession,” 23:16). This was the ultimate question: “Is there any meaning in my life that will not be destroyed by the death inevitably coming to me?” (16). And the ultimate answer Tolstoy discovered: Faith is the “knowledge of the meaning of human life, as a result of which a person does not destroy him or herself but lives” (35). This meaning cannot reside in any teaching offered by science, philosophy, or religion, for in that case it is nothing other than the “ephemerality of the finite” (33–4). The meaning that nothing destroys because it transcends everything can only be the meaning of the infinite: “Every response of faith to the finite existence of a person imparts the meaning of the infinite, a meaning that is not destroyed by suffering, deprivation, and death” (35).

Thus, faith, without which life is impossible, according to Tolstoy, is not hope of the fulfillment of the expected and trust in the testimony of the truth, but it is an “inner certitude of conviction, which becomes the basis of life,” (Tolstoy 1935–58, “The four Gospels harmonized and translated,” 24:795) a spiritual state of mind, which is the perception of the infinite. Such a faith directs a person’s actions, places one in a strictly defined position with respect to the world, and dictates one’s everyday conduct, as a result of which “one naturally acts in accordance with this position” (Tolstoy 1935–58, “What is religion and wherein lies its essence?” 35:170). This faith is never irrational, never conflicting with existing knowledge; this faith contains nothing contrary to reason, and, conversely, illuminates everything that without it seems irrational and contradictory (171–2).<sup>7</sup> In turn, one must have faith in reason, because it was given to humanity by God and proceeds from the very infinity that makes faith possible.

In sum, faith is humanity’s conscious relation to the infinite,<sup>8</sup> life in the perspective of infinity, “the sense come back that life was infinite in its moral significance” (James 1992, 201). This discovery of faith in oneself must undoubtedly lead to a full reexamination of all values

7. In my view, there is no basis for the frequent charge of rationalism leveled against Tolstoy, as Tolstoy in general did not support the traditional dichotomy between reason and the emotions and the rational and the irrational; to him reason was the sole and natural means of perceiving life, a means given by God to humanity. For more detail on the relationship between faith and reason for Tolstoy, see Gel’fond 2009.
8. Friedrich Schleiermacher’s definition of religion as the “sense and taste for the infinite” is the closest to Tolstoy’s understanding of faith. [I have seen the Schleiermacher phrase translated thus in English; I have also seen “feeling and taste” and “sensitivity and taste.” — Trans.]

and priorities, so that “everything that was on the right was on the left, and everything that was on the left was on the right” (Tolstoy, 1935–58, “My religion [What I believe]” 23:304). The universality of such a faith appears as its fundamental quality, in that the infinite, whose presence one perceives in the soul by means of faith and of which one is a part, cannot be particular but is universal.

Faith as the perception of the infinite in a person is a means of discovering God. Tolstoy emphasized repeatedly that it is necessary to find faith first, and then God, not the other way round (Tolstoy, 1935–58, “A confession,” 23:35). Finding God begins from the feeling of being orphaned and alone, from the feeling of the loss of faith in oneself and of the hope of someone’s help, but as long as God remains an external object toward which faith is directed, he in fact becomes only increasingly distant from a person. Ultimately, Tolstoy wrote, one can know God only in one’s soul, but only to the extent to which he is revealed to a person, and along with God one can also find oneself. This quest has no end; its main aspect is continuous movement, losses and gains, and simultaneously the paradoxical equivalence of process and result, occurring here and now:

That in which one must believe — a mystery — is the condition of every life, of movement. Without mystery there would be no possibility of moving forward to the unknown. If I were already there where I am going, I would not have gone. Movement toward this unknown is also life. Love for this unknown is faith. You are going to go anyway. But faith will make you go with joy (Tolstoy, 1935–58, *Diary and notebooks [for] 1890*, entry for January 3,” 51:13–14).

Tolstoy’s last words several days before his death concerned this known and unknowable God: “God is the limitless Everything, of which humanity recognizes itself as a limited part. Only God truly exists. Humanity is a manifestation of Him in matter, time, and space (Tolstoy, 1935–58, “Diary for myself alone,” October 31, 1910, 58:143). The “self” found in faith finds itself part of infinity, which is one with God to the extent that a person feels God in his or her soul.

### **Mere Christianity**

In 1859 Tolstoy confessed in the letter quoted above that he found little of importance in the Gospels. Twenty years later everything had changed:

I did not know the light; I thought there was no truth in life [ . . . ], I began to seek its source and found it in the Gospels [ . . . ] And, drawing near this source of light, I was blinded by it and received complete answers to questions about the meaning of my life and the lives of others, answers entirely convergent with all the answers I knew from other peoples and, in my view, surpassing all of them (Tolstoy, 1935–58, “The Gospel in brief,” 24:807).

Over the next thirty years Tolstoy tirelessly explained his understanding of Christianity repeatedly to all sorts of people — friends and enemies, allies and opponents — in all kinds of genres and forms, from artistic works to notes in his “Diary for Myself Alone.” Works in which Tolstoy laid out his conception of Christianity were well known during his lifetime despite censorship bans, and many people commented upon them and continue to do so, espousing extremely varied, often contradictory views. On June 15, 1881, Chief Procurator of the Holy Synod Konstantin Pobedonostsev wrote in a letter to Tolstoy concerning his petition for a pardon for the murderer of Emperor Alexander II: “When I read your letter I saw that your faith is one thing and that mine and that of the Church is another, and that our Christ is not your Christ” (quoted from Tolstoy 1935–58, 63:59). One must admit that in his own way he was right: Tolstoy’s Christ truly bore no relation to Pobedonostsev’s Christ.

Tolstoy, in setting out his conception of Christianity, continuously emphasized that he sought in New Testament texts only what was clear to him (Tolstoy, 1935–58, “The four Gospels harmonized and translated,” 24:18). In other words, Tolstoy proceeded from his own inner right to accept or reject any parts of the text. But it was this circumstance that drew the greatest censure from his critics, including those quite well-disposed toward him. For example, Vasily Zenkovsky called Tolstoy a victim of the “seduction of individualism” (Zen’kovskii 2000, 527), a man who “was never interested in the Gospels objectively” (525), who in his “religious system relied exclusively on his own religious experience and took from the Gospels that which corresponded to his own experience” (507). If, however, one acknowledges Tolstoy’s right (and that of any other person) to his own interpretation of the Gospels (and of any other text), then regardless of agreement or disagreement with his interpretation, the main thing will be the acceptance of his right and of the principles he established for himself. Taking into account that the Bible was written by people with their own merits and shortcomings, their own preconceptions and insights, one should probably agree that all the Bible’s readers have the same right

to their own preconceptions and insights. Furthermore, this right means that there are no obligations to dogmatic rules established by tradition and ecclesiastical institutions regarding the interpretation of New Testament texts. This is what fundamentally distinguishes Tolstoy from many Christian thinkers and is the main reason for the exasperation and indignation of his critics.

So, what was Tolstoy seeking and what did he find in the Gospels? By his own admission, he sought the one truth that faith should be. At first, Tolstoy turned to various ecclesiastical interpretations of Christianity, but did not find this one truth in any of them. Tolstoy's quest seemed impossible because Christians almost from the very beginning were divided among themselves, and the need arose in each group to "assert its truth, to impute infallibility to itself" (Tolstoy, 1935–58, "The kingdom of God is within you," 28:46). But for Tolstoy there was one truth, which — if it were the truth — should be the one truth for all. Accordingly, if each church thinks its own truth is the only one, this means that none of them possesses the truth: "It is evident that there is not and never has been one church, that there is not one church, not two, but two thousand, and that they all deny each other and only assert that each [one of them] is the one true church" (Tolstoy, 1935–58, "The four Gospels harmonized and translated," 24:10). To understand Christianity one must study "only the teaching of Christ, as it has come down to us, that is, the words and actions that are attributed to Christ" (Tolstoy, 1935–58, "The Gospel in brief," 24:814). In the diary entry for July 21, 1910, discussing how one should interpret the text of the Gospels, Tolstoy noted: "One has to read the Gospels and all the books recognized as Holy Scripture, analyzing their content, just as we analyze the content of all the books we read" (Tolstoy, 1935–58, 58:82).

Tolstoy found the one truth of Christianity in the commandment not to oppose evil with violence, which he had to discover anew "after 1800 years of profession of the law of Christ by billions of people, after thousands of people had devoted their lives to the study of this law" (Tolstoy, 1935–58, "My religion [What I believe]" 23:335). Countless works have been written on Tolstoy's interpretation of non-resistance, some enthusiastic, some critical. Here it is especially important to turn one's attention once more to *how* exactly Tolstoy formulated his conception of non-violence as the main content of Christianity. He wrote that 39 verses of Chapter 5 of the Gospel of Matthew became the key for him to all of Christ's teaching, emphasizing *what* was most important to him: "I suddenly for the first time understood this verse directly and simply. I understood that Christ is saying *what he is say-*

*ing* (emphasis mine — E. S.)” (310). This is also the point at which Tolstoy’s conversion occurred, “an instantaneous removal of all that obscured the meaning of the teaching, and an instantaneous illumination by the light of truth” (306). Then all former beliefs ceased to matter, and a spiritual revolution was underway:

And when I understood all these sayings simply and directly, as they had been said, then at once in all of Christ’s teaching, not only in the Sermon on the Mount but in all the Gospels, everything that had been confused became clear, what had been contradictory became consistent; and the main thing is that what had seemed superfluous, became essential. Everything flowed into a single whole and one part unquestionably corroborated another, like the fragments of a shattered statue, when put together as they should be (Tolstoy, 1935–58, “My religion [What I believe]” 23:311–2).

Non-violence is the same as love, and love is God, and this is the only thing a person can know about God (Tolstoy, 1935–58, Letter to E. D. Pospelovaia, May 11, 1907, 77:102). Faith in God, who lives in a person’s soul and through the teaching of Christ shows how one should live according to God’s will, is the sole condition for fulfilling the commandment of non-violence (Tolstoy, 1935–58, “The one commandment,” 38:115). Tolstoy was certain that supernatural help was unnecessary to fulfill this commandment; fulfillment lay entirely within human power, as it was a clear, definite, important, and practicable rule (Tolstoy, 1935–58, “My religion [What I believe]” 23:365). As Abdulalam Guseinov writes, “There is no other means of overcoming violence except refusing to commit it, and nothing can prevent a person who has realized this truth from following it, if one has decided to do so” (Guseinov 2018, 12). Non-resistance means making no distinctions between oneself and all other people, whatever their faith, race, nationality, and the like. Non-resistance means doing the will of God, which is “that people love each other and consequently treat each other as they would like others to treat them” (Tolstoy, 1935–58, “Response to the Synod’s Edict of February 20–22 and to the letters I received concerning this case. April 4, 1901,” 34:251).

In an unsent letter to N. N. Strakhov, written in November 1879, Tolstoy acknowledged:

In Christ’s teaching I found one special feature that distinguishes it from all [other] teachings. He teaches and explains why the meaning of our life is that which he gives to it. But with that he always says that one

must do what he says and then you will see whether what he says is true” (Tolstoy, 1935–58, 62:502).

This equivalence of faith and action flowed for Tolstoy from the very essence of the commandment of non-resistance, in which the whole meaning of Christ’s teaching found expression, for non-resistance entails action: the replacement of evil and violence with good and harmony (Tolstoy, 1935–58, Letter to N. Krastin of May 21, 1901, 73:77). But such action is possible, first, thanks to faith alone, which is the sole cause of good works, while good works, in turn, are the inevitable consequence of faith (Tolstoy, 1935–58, “An investigation of dogmatic theology,” 23:244). Second, this action is natural, flowing out of love, which has become the power of life and shows a person what one should do and how:

People who believe in the path of life are, according to Christ’s saying, like springs of living water, that is a spring gushing forth from the earth. Everything they do is like the flow of water, which flows everywhere, far and wide, despite obstacles holding it back. [People] who believe in Christ’s teaching can no more ask what positive thing [they] should do, than can a spring of water bubbling from the earth. It flows, giving drink to the earth, grass, trees, birds, animals, and people (Tolstoy, 1935–58, “Industriousness, or the triumph of the land-tiller [preface to the work of T. M. Bondarev],” 25:471).

Tolstoy constantly repeated that the Christian teaching “is a clear, profound, and *simple* (emphasis mine — E. S.) teaching of life, fulfilling the highest needs of the human soul” (Tolstoy, 1935–58, “The four Gospels harmonized and translated,” 24:7), and called his confidence in the simplicity of Christianity “a terrible and joyous truth” (Tolstoy, 1935–58, “My religion [What I believe]” 23:357). This simplicity is determined by the truth of Christianity, which is understood to be love for God and one’s neighbor, being a position that requires no additional explanations: “It is one, because it is everything” (Tolstoy, 1935–58, “Industriousness, or the triumph of the land-tiller,” 25:470). The teaching consists only of the meaning it gives to life; there is no mysticism in it, nothing mysterious or incomprehensible, but simply the certainty that only in this way can life be a blessing (Tolstoy, 1935–58, “Industriousness, or the triumph of the land-tiller,” 25:470). To believe in God as in love “people need only believe in what actually exists [. . .], in what

it is impossible not to believe" (Tolstoy, 1935–58, "The one commandment," 38:110).

Least necessary of all for such a faith is faith in the resurrection of Christ as a miracle, which, in Tolstoy's thought, "directly contradicts the teaching of Christ" (Tolstoy, 1935–58, "The four Gospels harmonized and translated," 24:792). On the contrary, Tolstoy was certain that it was the death of Christ that emerges as the condition for living out his teaching. In the work "The Four Gospels Harmonized and Translated," Tolstoy sets out the words of Christ about his death thus:

But truly I say to you, that it is good for you that I go away. If I do not die, then the spirit of truth will not appear to you, but if I die, then it will take up residence within you. It will enter you, and it will be clear to you what is a lie, what is truth, what you should do (Tolstoy, 1935–58, 24:757).

In other words, the "resurrection" of Christ for Tolstoy makes sense only as the realization of his teaching, and therefore each one who accepts this teaching thereby resurrects Christ in himself. Christ lives while those to whom his teaching is the truth of life live. In a letter to Nikolai Ge (the father) dated March 2–3, 1884, Tolstoy wrote: "There is no way that I shall believe that he was resurrected in his body, but I shall never lose the truth that he will rise again in his teaching" (Tolstoy, 1935–58, 63:160).

If one recognizes Tolstoy's right to see in the New Testament the meaning closest to him, then Christ appears to be inextricably linked with the person of Tolstoy himself as his interpreter. Moreover, it is this connection of the image of Christ with Tolstoy's unique lived experience that is the condition for the unique "resurrection" of Christ in Tolstoy, as well as in each subsequent reader of the biblical text.

Tolstoy understood that faith in love, which has no external form, and the worship of God, which is not defined by any form, time, or place, might seem vague and even dubious to most people (Tolstoy, 1935–58, "The one commandment," 38:104). At the same time, it is difficult even for people convinced of the truth of their faith not to doubt it, "when [they] learn that other people just as persuaded of the truth of their [own] beliefs also consider the [first group's] faith false" (105). The resolution of this contradiction, which in Tolstoy's view destroyed the truth of ecclesiastical Christianity, lies in recognizing love as the one object of faith and the sole principle of life, common to all people. The person who acknowledges love as such an object of faith common to all cannot have any doubts of its truth (105); and Christi-

anity, which focuses on love as the basis of life, coincides with “the basic tenets of Brahmanism, Confucianism, Taoism, Judaism, Buddhism, even Mahommedanism,” and, like all these teachings, seems simple, comprehensible, and rather uncomplicated (Tolstoy, 1935–58, “What is religion and wherein lies its essence?” 35:190). As Tolstoy noted in a diary entry on February 13, 1907, a common fundamental rule exists, the main tenets of which are identical in all confessions because of the oneness of human nature (Tolstoy, 56:15). This fundamental rule, in Tolstoy’s thought,

defines a person’s relationship to God as that of the part to the whole; from this relationship comes a person’s purpose, consisting of the increase in oneself of the divine attributes; one’s purpose [is] to derive practical rules from the rule to treat others as you would have them treat you (Tolstoy, 1935–58, “What is religion and wherein lies its essence?”, 35:191).

This is what reason, placed in people by God, requires of them. Reason unites people — near and far, the departed, the living, and those yet to be born — in the ability to love one another:

Thus, we enjoy all that reason has produced, the reason of Isaiah, of Christ, of Buddha, of Socrates, and of Confucius, and of all the people who lived before us and who put their trust in reason and served it. Treat others as you would have them treat you, do not retaliate against those who did evil to you but return good for evil, be temperate, chaste, not only do not kill people but do not become angry with them, be at peace with all, and much else, all this is the product of reason and all this is preached alike by Buddhists, Confucians, Christians, Taoists, Greek and Egyptian wise men, and all good people of our day (Tolstoy, 1935–58, Letter to V. K. Zavolokin, December 17, 1900, 72:528).

With respect to Tolstoy’s faith, above all one must stress its exceptional, deep feeling, reasonableness, and absolute completeness. All the components of this faith, all the questions and answers exist and are developed in unity with each other and, ultimately, converge in a single point. Furthermore, simplicity proves to be a key characteristic of this convergence, in that the state of faith, a means of holding infinity in the present, can entail only the kind of content expressible in a fleeting instant of the present. At the same time this content — love — is “the manifestation of the divine essence, for which there is

no [such thing as] time, and therefore love appears only in the present, now, at every minute of the present” (Tolstoy, 1935–58, “The path of life,” 45:336). In fact it is difficult to pin this faith down in some sort of finished form, for it is characterized by continuous movement from oneself to God, movement in which there are not and cannot be definite laws and rules, while Christian commandments are “in essence like markers on the infinite path of perfection, toward which humanity is moving” (Tolstoy, 1935–58, “The kingdom of God is within you,” 28:80). The faith to which Tolstoy came is life itself, rather, it is a condition of life as inevitable as breathing (Tolstoy, 1935–58, Letter to A. E. Alekhin, April 11, 1909, 79:155).

### **The Problem of Conveying Faith**

Many have levelled countless invectives against Tolstoy’s idea of faith. In this section, I will consider the reproaches concerning individualism (already discussed above) in the wider context of the problem of Tolstoy’s transmission of his beliefs and the possibility (and/or the limitations) of other people understanding them.

After Tolstoy’s conversion his views on faith evoked astonishment and indignation, but also admiration among those close to him as well as those who were more distant. Alexandra Tolstaya, a close friend and simultaneously an opponent of Tolstoy’s religious views, gave the following description of him:

He always lived only with his own impressions, his own thoughts, admitting no outside influence and attaching no value to the beliefs of others [. . .] Perhaps I am mistaken, but it seems to me at times that it is from this point of exclusive trust in his own conclusions that Levochka has also proceeded step by step to begin to reject and demolish no longer [just] human opinions, but also the Word of God, when it conflicted with his beliefs. He sought God, but without humility, and found only himself, that is some sort of new ugly code that he invented, and which he values and *is proud of* precisely because he worked it out himself (Azarova 2011, Letter to S. A. Tolstaia, July 19, 1882, 533).

Father John of Kronstadt, Tolstoy’s implacable opponent, wrote of him thus: “I and no one besides me,’ dreams Tolstoy. ‘You are all in error; I discovered the truth and I shall teach all people the truth!’” (Ioann Kronshtadskii, O. [Fr. John of Kronstadt] 2000, 367). Mikhail Novoselov, initially a follower of Tolstoy but then a harsh critic, made the

following accusation against him: “Your God is only your idea; you set your heart on it and [you] are still enamored of it, turning it from side to side over the course of two decades. You cannot get out from the enchanted circle of your own ‘self’” (Novoselov 2000, 381).

Vladimir Chertkov — Tolstoy’s closest friend and comrade-in-arms — stressed that Tolstoy “always acted without following any program imposed on him from outside and without succumbing to anyone’s personal influence. In his distinctive way he was guided only by the dictates of his own inner consciousness” (Chertkov 1922, 67).<sup>9</sup> Nikolai Lossky wrote of “the unusually broad dimensions” in which Tolstoy manifested his individuality and realized his multifaceted development (Losskii 2000, 233).

It has already been said that Tolstoy arrived at a personal understanding of faith after he became convinced of the futility of following anyone else’s path. Of course, he knew perfectly well the heated feelings evoked by his views and could not remain indifferent:

The whole meaning of my writings is that I am expressing *my own*, my own personal faith [. . .] I am often surprised by the irritation that my confession of faith elicits. [. . .] My friends, even my family, turn away from me. Some who are liberals and aesthetes think me mad or weak-minded like Gogol; others — revolutionaries [and] radicals — think me a mystic, a wind-bag; government people think I’m a malicious revolutionary; the Orthodox think I’m the devil. — I admit that this is hard for me (Tolstoy, 1935–58, Letter to A. A. Tolstaya, 1884, 63:201).

Nevertheless, as Abdusalam Guseinov emphasizes, Tolstoy “could in no case agree that his judgments have the status of an opinion, being one of the points of view” (Guseinov 2018, 10). There are at least two reasons for this: first, Tolstoy was entirely convinced that his personal path in faith for all its uniqueness was at the same time universal. Of this Tolstoy wrote: “I am so firmly convinced that what is the truth for me is the truth for all people, that the question of when people will come to this truth does not interest me” (Tolstoy 1935–58, Letter to V. G. Chertkov, May 19, 1884, 85:60). This confidence in the universal meaning of faith in people’s lives was strengthened and expanded as Tolstoy became convinced that he was not alone in his interpretation of the Gospel as the answer to the question of the meaning of life:

9. This statement must be interpreted in the context of the situation with Tolstoy’s will, but it seems to me it is much broader in meaning.

This very answer to the question of life was expressed more or less clearly by all the best people of humanity both before and after the gospel, beginning with Moses, Isaiah, Confucius, the ancient Greeks, Buddha, Socrates, and up to Pascal, Spinoza, Fichte, Feuerbach and all those often unnoted and unheralded people who sincerely, without teachings taken on faith, thought and spoke on the meaning of life (Tolstoy 1935–58, “The Christian teaching,” 39:119).

Second, since faith and action are one and the same, according to Tolstoy, from the moment of finding faith he perceived his actions as a mission, considering it impossible not to speak up publicly about faith, even at the risk of being misunderstood and coming into conflict with the “reigning faith” (Tolstoy 1935–58, Letter to A. A. Tolstaia, 1884, 63:200). Just as each person who follows Christ as the messenger of truth must also be a messenger (Tolstoy 1935–58, Letter to V. G. Chertkov, January 30–February 3, 1885, 85:136), so a person, like a flying stone, must strive toward the goal and rejoice “that it is flying, and knows that it is nothing [in] itself — a stone, and all its significance lies in this flight” (Tolstoy 1935–58, Letter to N. N. Ge (the son), February 4, 1885, 63:207). In the work “My religion (What I believe)” Tolstoy wrote:

I believe that my life and knowledge of the truth is a talent, given to me to develop, that this talent is a fire that is only a fire when it is burning. I believe that I am Nineveh in relation to other Jonahs, from whom I learned and am learning the truth, but that I am also Jonah in relation to other Ninevites, to whom I must impart the truth (Tolstoy 1935–58, 23:461).

This mission as an emissary was based on confidence in the essential unity of all people, as a result of which an increase of one person’s faith makes possible an increase in the faith of all people (Tolstoy 1935–58, Diary [for] 1894, April 21, 52:116). Drawing upon Lao-Tzu, Tolstoy wrote: “In order to achieve something great, a person must do something small, but believe that in this small thing lies salvation not only for him but for the whole world. [ . . . ] It is necessary to believe in the immensity of this act” (Tolstoy 1935–58, Letter to V. G. Chertkov, September 21, 1893, 87:223).

This sense of mission, born of inner freedom and the right to express one’s own personal faith, had another side, however — doubts of one’s own sincerity, the need to find like-minded thinkers, disappoint-

ment in one's hopes, and a feeling of endless aloneness. From the very beginning Tolstoy strove to assure himself of the genuineness of the motives prompting him to the public expression of his beliefs, fearing ambition, pride, and self-deception (Tolstoy 1935–58, Letter to V. I. Alekseev, November 15–30? [sic], 1881, 63:80). He was well aware of the danger of mixing two motives — doing things for God and for worldly glory — for it is very difficult to draw a line between them: “It sometimes happens that you think you believe in something in which you do not, and sometimes the reverse — you think you do not believe in something but you do” (Tolstoy 1935–58, Letter to E. I. Popov, September 16, 1890, 65:162). Tolstoy acknowledged the dearth of people close to him who shared his faith and longed to subject his convictions to the judgment of co-religionists (Tolstoy 1935–58, Letter to V. G. Chertkov, June 6–7, 1885, 85:223). Tolstoy constantly sought examples of true faith among the vast number of people with whom he associated, fascinated by them yet disappointed in them. He constantly emphasized that he had no teaching of his own apart from the teaching of Christ, which, in turn, as movement from a person to God, did not and could not contain any definite laws and rules and before which “any degree of perfection and any degree of imperfection” were equal (Tolstoy 1935–58, “The kingdom of God is within you,” 28:79).

Finally, Tolstoy felt loneliness acutely in a simple human sense. In an April 3, 1892, diary entry Tolstoy wrote:

I am alone, while there are so horribly, endlessly many people, all these people are so diverse, it is so impossible for me to know them all — all these Indians, Malays, Japanese, even all those people w[ho] are always with me — my children, [my] wife . . . Among all these people I am alone, quite lonely and alone. And the consciousness of this loneliness, and of the need to interact with all [these] people, and of the impossibility of this interaction is enough to [cause me to] go out of my mind. The only salvation is the consciousness of an inner association, through God, with all of them. When one finds this association, the need for external interaction ceases to trouble one (Tolstoy 1935–58, 52:64–65).

But despite all this, Tolstoy never deviated from his concept of faith and its content, Christ's teaching on non-resistance to evil by force. Several weeks before his death Tolstoy wrote that finally he understood clearly the line between resistance as “rendering evil for evil” and “the resistance of holding firm in an action that you recognize as your duty before your conscience and God” (Tolstoy 1935–58, Letter to

V. G. Chertkov, September 16, 1910, 89:213). Tolstoy came a long way in faith — from the dream of founding his own religion, through the passionate rejection of the kind of faith he considered a “fraud” (On this see Gel’fond 2009), through the antagonism of people who disagreed with him, to the firm conviction that true faith entails tolerance toward other faiths. He came to this after contact with an unbelievable number of people, both those who understood and accepted his beliefs as well as those who were completely intolerant toward them. In the end, Tolstoy understood that each person has the faith that corresponds to his or her mind and heart, and therefore it is impossible to require people to believe at someone else’s behest. Moreover, in this case, when faith is the result of an exclusively individual path, it is evident that the advantage of freedom and independence in conveying this faith to other people is limited. In other words, one must transmit and share individual experience together with faith, and this is scarcely possible. In a February 11, 1908, notebook entry, Tolstoy remarked: “There is no way to inspire [in another], to transfer to another a religious worldview. [ . . . ] It is only possible to give materials for the formation of one’s worldview, and [the other] will take from them what [that person] needs” (Tolstoy 1935–58, 56:311). To Alexandra Tolstoy, a long-time opponent of the author’s position on faith, he wrote:

This truth has long been known to all, and I only recently felt it in my heart, and understood that a person’s faith (again, if it is sincere) cannot lessen his virtues and my love for him. And from that time I ceased to want to communicate my faith to others and felt that I love people regardless entirely of their faith and attack only the insincere, the hypocrites, who preach what they do not believe (Tolstoy 1935–58, Letter to A. A. Tolstaia, February 21, 1903, 74:48–49).

So, what was faith for Tolstoy? In an existential sense one’s faith is oneself, a point of support, on which one’s whole life is built and which gives one the opportunity to develop. Each person has such a point of support: “Everything depends on the weight of the demands of the heart and mind” (Tolstoy 1935–58, Diary [for] 1910, March 27, 58:30). Faith is the only way of finding one’s true “self”: “Faith is only the consciousness of one’s position — one’s position is not higher, and most importantly is not lower, not more insignificant, than it is” (Tolstoy 1935–58, letter to V. G. Chertkov, December 23? [*sic*], 1889, 86:281). Such a faith is composed of complex, inexpressible spiritual processes that connect a person with God, and this connection does not per-

mit any outside interference. This kind of faith places on every true believer the obligation to respect the sincere faith of other people and not to interfere with it. “If I ever have strayed from this rule,” wrote Tolstoy, “then I repent of this with my whole heart and ask forgiveness of those whose feelings I offended in this way” (Tolstoy 1935–58, Draft letter to an unknown addressee, June 21, 1909, 79:241).

### **Conclusion: Tolstoy for us**

Before addressing what we can learn today in Tolstoy’s statements about faith, I want to note several methodological considerations. As already discussed, Tolstoy (like any artist and thinker) deserves to be judged by the laws that he himself acknowledged for himself (in accordance with Pushkin’s famous maxim). Hence, one should not assign Tolstoy’s faith in the unity of its existential and objective content to the spheres of philosophy, religion, or artistic creativity; correspondingly, one must not analyze it using the methods of these other spheres. Tolstoy’s faith is not an intellectual construct nor a religious teaching, but an attitude toward life and is itself his life. This faith has the unconditional right to be what it is because it made it possible for him to answer that one question he posed to himself: Who am I?

A scholar who seeks to give an adequate interpretation of someone else’s viewpoint should be neither an adherent nor a judge. Rather, as Alexander Piatigorsky wrote, he or she should observe the thought of others, while not repudiating his or her own personal perspective, but rather observing it (like all others) as *other*: “The position of the observer then will relate not to the observation of the *world*, about which others and the observer think, but only to the *thought* of others and the observer about this world. Such a position may for our purposes be called a meta-position (*metapositsiia*)” (Piatigorsky 1996, 353). It seems to me that this kind of meta-position with respect to Tolstoy’s faith excludes its evaluation as true or false (which would inevitably be subjective); rather, the position consists of striving to see this faith in the context of the author’s whole life and creative work and with unconditional trust in his own words. This trust is justified, first, by the exceptional, time-proven integrity of Tolstoy’s faith, and second, by the author’s merciless presentation of himself as simultaneously the subject of the faith and an observer of himself, the “resident” and the “stranger” in relation to himself, to use Richard Gustafson’s metaphor (Gustafson 1986 and 2003).

What is most important for us today in discussion of Tolstoy's faith? I think it is the aspect for which he was most criticized, namely, the extremely *individual* nature of his faith. What many perceived in the early twentieth century as a malevolent violation of generally accepted rules has become in the early twenty-first century one of the characteristic traits of contemporary society, in which widely varied individual forms of faith exist, whose trajectory a person can construct independently.

Inessa Medzhibovskaya has expressed the interesting thought that Tolstoy "was Russia's first modern man, the first defender of the autonomous freedom of conscience, its first consistent and courageous point of contact, its open practice and forum" (Medzhibovskaya 2009, 352). In addition, Tolstoy's individualization of faith corresponds surprisingly to what Ulrich Beck has called "the second modernity" (the second half of the twentieth century). In Beck's interpretation, the individualization of religion initiated by the Reformation ("the first modernity") took place within Christianity, whereas the individualization of religion occurred in the "second modernity." In the latter, each person, regardless of whether one adheres to any established religious system or formulates a system oneself, does so as if creating one's own religion or, in Beck's words, "a God of one's own" (Beck 2010, 81). People can now form their religious identity independently, borrowing its elements from various, not necessarily interconnected sources.

This formation often involves a process of constructing and reconstructing an individual religious identity on a foundation of elements combined from various traditions. Here it is important to emphasize that the individual doing this does not now depend on the rule of external dogmatic authorities but, in the words of English sociologists Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, has the "courage to become one's own authority" (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 4). To be sure, for all the importance of the process of the individualization of religion, it is certainly not some sort of universally binding developmental trend in contemporary society but represents only a tendency manifest in various forms. The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor called this situation in contemporary culture "the massive subjective turn [. . .], a new form of inwardness, in which we come to think of ourselves as beings with inner depths" (Taylor 1991, 26).

In the contemporary pluralist world, filled with an endless number of different cultures, people, and worldviews, combined in countless ways, Tolstoy has become an interlocutor who demonstrates rootedness in his own culture, confidence in his own beliefs, and at

the same time openness to other traditions and respect for otherness. As Abdusalam Guseinov notes, in Tolstoy “there are no religious, national, class, historical, or any other constraints that would make him unacceptable to representatives of any religion” (Guseinov 2018, 12).

The most important problem in the contemporary pluralist world, one actively discussed in the socio-political sciences, is the problem of accepting the “other,” which is possible only when the other’s right to a different opinion and a way of life that is considered an equally valued component of community life is acknowledged. When one speaks of religious pluralism, the problem here lies in the need to reconcile seemingly irreconcilable things: faith in the truth of one’s own religion and toleration for the truth of other religions. But one can look at this another way, namely, one can admit that at the current stage of the individualization of religion the possession of the only truth, as well as maintenance of the dogmatic purity of a belief system, in many instances ceases to be an end in and of itself. On the contrary, the multiplicity of religious systems proves to be a source of people’s spiritual development. In the words of Danièle Hervieu-Léger:

Legitimation of belief is moving from religious authorities, guarantors of the truth of belief, to individuals themselves, who are responsible for the authenticity of their own spiritual approach. What gives value to the believer’s search, not only in his own eyes but also in the eyes of those with whom he dialogues, and before whom he testifies, is his sincerity and personal commitment (Hervieu-Léger 2015, 256–7).

In this case, the reconciliation of different religious concepts and traditions is perceived as the norm and as a means of learning more about one’s own religious experience, as well as the experience of others. Since now no one has to be right in the sense of possessing religious truth, the maxim “freedom of religion is freedom of other people’s religion” (Beck 2010, 141) comes into effect.

Tolstoy’s conviction of the unity of all religions makes it possible to resolve the dilemma of accepting the “other’s” truth, in that “the golden rule of morality,” as the only content common to all religions, not only permits but presupposes the differences in religious beliefs in everything except this rule itself. In other words, the unity of religions lies in the principle that governs relations between people and not in the specific content of faith teachings, which may be as different as can be. It was this — and not his exclusive right to possess the truth —

that Tolstoy passionately defended when he wrote: “I do not say that I alone am in the truth and that all who believe otherwise are in error, but I ask all others to treat me in the same way” (Tolstoy 1935–58, Letter to M. M. Dondukovaia-Korsakovaia, August 31–September 1? [sic], 1909, 80:83). Thus, the conclusion that flows inevitably from an interpretation of Tolstoy’s faith in accordance with his own principles consists of the recognition of Tolstoy’s right, as well as that of all other people, to one’s own faith, which is the only condition that gives us the right to profess our faith freely. And conversely, if we deny other people this right, we thereby deny it to ourselves.

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