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> *Christianity in its true sense puts an end to the State. It was so understood from its very beginning, and for that Christ was crucified.*
>
> Leo Tolstoy

Even for a Christian anarchist, Leo Tolstoy's reading of the Bible was unusual. When he 'converted' to Christianity near his 50th birthday, he did not embrace the orthodox Christianity of the traditional church. For him, Jesus was no 'son of God', nor did he perform any supernatural miracles. Tolstoy was convinced that these superstitious stories in the Bible had been added by the church in order to keep 'Christians' hypnotised enough to ensure that they did not question the unjustifiable compromise that the church had reached with the state. He was convinced that an honest and full application of Christianity could only lead to a stateless and churchless society, and that all those who argued the contrary were devious hypocrites.

Conversion to Christianity

Tolstoy was born in a wealthy, aristocratic family in 1828. In the 1950s, he gradually established himself as a respected novel writer. His two most famous works, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, were written between 1863 and 1869 and between 1873 and 1877 respectively.

In 1869, however, Tolstoy's life started to change. During a trip to a distant Russian province, he underwent an agonising experience of human mortality. In the middle of the night, he was seized by a sense of futility of all endeavours given that death could be the only ultimate outcome. It was not death itself that horrified him, but the fact that life seemed to have no meaning if death was guaranteed to follow.

This experience haunted him ever more forcefully over the next ten years. As he explains in *A Confession*, he increasingly

restlessly sought the meaning of life in the great thinkers of science, religion and philosophy – all in vain. Nowhere could he find anything that gave meaning and value to life. He even contemplated suicide.

Then came the breakthrough. He observed that the peasants around him – which as a proud aristocrat he had hitherto overlooked – seemed to approach death with calm and serenity. But why? What was it that helped them remain so serene in the face of the apparent futility of life? Tolstoy realised that what they had was 'faith'. This intrigued Tolstoy, yet it also gave him hope. So he plunged into the Bible with renewed enthusiasm, in the hope that the meaning of life would finally be disclosed to him – and this time, it was.

The Sermon on the Mount

This revelation came to him suddenly, as he reflected on one specific and famous passage of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. This passage, Tolstoy declares in *What I Believe*, at once unlocked the whole meaning of the Bible, and with this his existential anxiety at last came to rest. These all-important words are in Matthew 5:38–42, and in the King James Version read as follows:

> Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth:
>
> But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.
>
> And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also.
>
> And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain.

cording to Tolstoy, there are no supernatural wonders, the light of reason features prominently, and the text ends when Jesus dies on the Cross – so no fancy resurrection in this version.

Tolstoy thus reduced religion to morality, and for him the most eloquent moral code ever articulated by a human being was Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. He suspected all theological mysteries and dogmas to have been added by deceitful state or church authorities. So he warned that one must read both the Bible and theological pronouncements on it very cautiously, filtering every proposition through the invaluable test of reason.

Hence he never believed in life after death. What appeased his earlier existential restlessness is difficult to understand, let alone describe, because he does not actually explain it very well. But it has something to do with the realisation that there is something infinite beyond the finite, and that 'faith' in this grants knowledge of the meaning of life. What that 'infinite' is, however, remains obscure. It seems to be closely related to both reason and love, but this is left unclear in his writings.

Still, the point is that he did find some sort of 'meaning of life' in his rationalistic understanding of Christianity. He could now see a purpose in life, which was to strive to live up to Jesus' teaching, to respond to all evil by overcoming it through the contagious power of love. This, he thought, would be the only way to achieve further progress in human relations.

His version of Christianity will be uncomfortable to those who sincerely believe that divine mysteries can only be revealed through patient contemplation and diligent ritual. And critics could well be right in being weary of Tolstoy's extreme, almost fundamentalistic interpretation of Christianity. Yet Tolstoy's contribution to Christian anarchism remains valuable in that he brings attention to the neglected political implications of the Sermon on the Mount, and on this topic, he wrote well and he wrote a lot. His interpretation of Christianity may have been peculiar indeed, but his work makes him an eminent voice in the Christian anarchist literature today.

Russia and elsewhere. His fellow Russians respected him for standing up to the Tsar, but he also received plenty of letters (including from Gandhi) and visits from abroad by people inquiring about his political interpretation of Christianity. So he became an important international figure at the turn of the century, even though today, we only really remember him for the novels he wrote before he 'converted' to Christianity.

A rationalistic Christianity

At the same time, his understanding of Christianity was not without problems. He may have been right in drawing attention to a neglected dimension of the Bible, but his interpretation of the metaphysics behind it remains unacceptable to many Christians today. Why? Because in his urge to purge what he saw as a corrupted version of Jesus' teaching, Tolstoy imposed a very rationalistic approach to Christianity, one that does away with all mysteries, rituals or traditions.

In his search for the meaning of life, Tolstoy's only torch was the light of nineteenth-century reason. If he was won over by Jesus' message, it was because he came to believe that Jesus was simply the most rational but human teacher ever to have walked the planet – not some incredible 'son of God' whose body was resurrected and actually flew back into heaven. Tolstoy believed that traditional mysteries such as Jesus' divinity, Mary's virginity, miracles and resurrections were either total nonsense or could be rationalised away.

For him, the Bible was peppered with implausible superstitions designed to divert the reader's attention away from the rational teachings now hidden within it. This is why Tolstoy actually rewrote the gospel (only a summary of which has been translated into English): he eliminated all irrational additives, harmonised any conflicting accounts, and rearranged Jesus' life in a logical chronological narrative. In this gospel ac-

> Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away

For Tolstoy, the implications of these instructions were nothing short of revolutionary. Jesus was proposing a new, radical and wiser method for human beings to respond to any form of 'evil'. That is, when coerced or when treated unjustly, do not retaliate, but respond with love, forgiveness and generosity.

Tolstoy reflected on Jesus' advice and observed that mankind has always been caught in a vicious cycle of tit-for-tat evil and violence. Human beings constantly try to resist evil with evil, to deal violently with problems of violence, to wage war to preclude another war. But such responses succeed only in spreading bitterness, anger and resentment – and all that this guarantees is further evil and suffering further down the line.

The only remedy to this vicious cycle of violence, Tolstoy now realised, was to juxtapose to it the virtuous cycle of love so well articulated by Jesus. The destructive cycle of evil, anger and revenge can only be overpowered by a patient cycle of love, forgiveness and sacrifice. Turning the other cheek does mean more suffering in the short term, but the hope is that eventually, the evildoer will repent and change his ways. Just as violence is contagious, so, too, is love.

Yet as Tolstoy understood, this means that one must forego the desire to force others to behave in a certain way. There cannot be any difference between means and ends: violence breeds further violence, and only love can eventually bring about a society bound by charity, peace and love. And love can only be taught by example. This requires courage, because even when persecuted unjustly, the follower of Christ must patiently love and forgive – even, that is, when the ultimate price to pay is death (or crucifixion!).

That, for Tolstoy, is the essence of Jesus' teaching to mankind. It is what Jesus taught throughout his ministry, and it is what he enacted in his very life and death. And the most eloquent summary of this rule of love and non-resistance is that beautiful passage from the Sermon on the Mount.

Some will of course say that this vision is utopian and unrealistic, but to that point of view, in *What I Believe* (pp. 18–19), Tolstoy has this to say:

> It may be affirmed that the constant fulfilment of this rule is difficult, and that not every man will find his happiness in obeying it. It may be said that it is foolish; that, as unbelievers pretend, Jesus was a visionary, an idealist, whose impracticable rules were only followed because of the stupidity of his disciples. But it is impossible not to admit that Jesus did say very clearly and definitely that which he intended to say: namely, that men should not resist evil; and that therefore he who accepts his teaching cannot resist.

Hence, according to Tolstoy, only hypocrites deny that the crux of Jesus' teaching was to call for non-resistance to (whatever gets defined as) evil.

Unchristian institutions

If that is the essence of Christianity, however, then for Tolstoy, Christians ought to reconsider the relationship they have with the state. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructed his followers not to swear oaths, not to judge and not to resist. Yet the state demands oaths of allegiance, judges its citizens and resists both criminals within and enemies without. Besides, the state uses violence to impose its laws, and maintains its citizens in a form of economic slavery. Thus, Tolstoy concludes, the state is an unchristian institution.

Furthermore, if Christians actually acted as Jesus taught them to – if they governed their social interactions through love, forgiveness and charity – then there would be no need for a state. People would help one another and willingly share all of life's basic necessities. The ordering principle of society would be love, not a fictional 'justice' enforced by a brutal state.

For Tolstoy, therefore, Christianity and the state are incompatible visions for society. One cannot be both an honest Christian and at the same time recognise the legitimacy of the state, both because the state directly contravenes Jesus' clear advice, and because if Jesus' recommendations were put to practice, then the state would anyway become obsolete.

But why, then, are Christians told to own allegiance to the state? For Tolstoy, the answer is clear: ever since Emperor Constantine, the official church has betrayed Christianity by hypocritically cuddling with state power. Tolstoy is therefore just as scathing of the church as of the state. He accuses church and state authorities of conspiring to maintain their hold on power by perpetuating a cunning mix of irrational lies and legitimised violence to keep 'Christians' hypnotised into submission. He uses strong language against the church, because he considers it to have betrayed Jesus' teaching by choosing to focus on rituals and superstitions rather than on the central message summarised in the Sermon on the Mount. For him, the behaviour of both church and state runs counter to Jesus' teaching, and they are therefore both unchristian institutions which are bound to become obsolete in a truly Christian society.

For the last thirty years of his life, Tolstoy relentlessly wrote tens of books, articles and pamphlets on religion and politics in the hope that it could help awaken his fellow Christians to the true essence of Christianity. His virulent criticisms of both state and church authorities led him to be frequently censored, but his writings were published abroad and circulated both in