Tolstoy and the Bible: A complex relationship

by Victor Lyakhou

What factors led this famous writer to first embrace and then reject the Bible as an inspired book?

A moral philosopher. A social reformer. A political critic. A great writer. A self-renouncing mystic. No one fits these descriptions as well as Leo Tolstoy, perhaps the greatest novelist Russia has produced. Tolstoy (1828-1910) wielded the pen not to entertain but to probe the inner soul, not to simply chronicle the great events of his time but to bring a moral passion and a spiritual judgment on those events.

Leo Tolstoy was born at Yasnnaya Polyana, about 100 miles south of Moscow. Both his parents died while he was young, and he was raised by relatives. After receiving his early education from foreign tutors, he entered the University of Kazan in 1844, but was bored with his studies. He returned to his family estate and devoted himself to personal study of the inner meaning of life. Before he was 30, he published his reflections in a quasi-autobiographical trilogy: *Childhood* (1852), *Boyhood* (1854), and *Youth* (1857). These works set the tone for his future writings: the study of a person's inner world, the moral mandate of life, a hidden common logic in everyday life, a strong criticism of the social and moral foundations of society. In 1863, he published the highly praised short novel, *The Cossacks*.

Tolstoy's greatest work was the epic, *War and Peace* (1863-69). It re-creates the life of different Russian social groups during the Napoleonic war of 1812. Besides being a chronicle of history, the novel addresses a number of religious-philosophical ideas, including individual freedom. It rejects the "great man" theory of history, arguing that heroes have no great impact on the course of history. What influences history is the moral and the spiritual fiber of individuals, frequently the common people.

Tolstoy's second masterpiece, *Anna Karenina* (1875-1877), depicts the tragedy of a Russian princess who falls victim to her passions and leads a life of infidelity, eventually ending in suicide. The novel exposes the false foundations of secular society and aristocracy's hypocrisy toward moral issues. From the end of the 1870s, Tolstoy experienced a deep spiritual crisis and felt the need for moral improvement. Besides a thorough self-examination, he launched a steady criticism of the social and religious foundations of Russian society, including the state and the Orthodox Church.

Religious themes marked some of his other works, such as his novel *Resurrection* (1899), and short stories, "The Power of Darkness" (1888), "The Death of Ivan Ilyich" (1886), "The Devil" (1889), and "The Kreutzer Sonata" (1891). A master psychologist and a skillful literary craftsman, he engaged his readers in a deep quest for the real meaning of life, focusing on such issues as love, jealousy, sex, death, and family.

Tolstoy's inner agony and moral self-examination came to full play in his essay "My Confession"(1882). He then developed an individualistic view of Christianity, different from the Orthodox Church, in works such as "What I Believe" (1884) and "The Kingdom of God Is Within You" (1893). The latter work not only taught Christian love and forgiveness, but also non-violence in the face of evil.

His continuing struggle to achieve high moral standards led Tolstoy, in his

old age, to leave the comforts of his home seeking to live an ascetic life. Eventually, his health broke down and on November 7, 1910, he died almost alone, away from home. His body was buried on his estate. No religious rites marked the funeral.

Early struggles

Tolstoy's life, beginning with childhood, was marked by a series of inner crises. In "My Confessions," he admits that although he was baptized and brought up in an Orthodox family, by the time he was 18, he did not believe anything he had been taught. He writes: "To judge from certain recollections, I had never believed in earnest; I had confidence only in what I was taught and what the grown persons confessed in my presence; but this confidence was very brittle."[1]

One childhood incident affected him profoundly. When Tolstoy was 11, his friend and classmate Volodia shared the latest news from the school: "There is no God. Everything we are taught in family and school is fiction." Could the news be true, pondered young Tolstoy. By the time he was 16, he had stopped going to church, and lost interest in prayer and fasting. Like many young people with no distinct religious orientation, Tolstoy embraced the philosophy of "natural instincts," and later confessed he had spent 10 years immersed in fornication, drinking, violence, murder, and many other transgressions. In 1851, he joined the army. His experience led to *The Cossacks,* a short novel chronicling the war in the Caucasus region, which won him fame throughout Russia.

Tolstoy retired from military service in 1856. Notwithstanding his frivolousness and recklessness, he spent a great deal of time in contemplation. At critical moments as, for example, when he was a guard with the Cossacks, he often prayed and begged God to protect him.

In 1857 he began to travel throughout Europe, meeting men of great learning and seeing progress everywhere. However, a chance witness of capital punishment gave him a rude shock. He questioned whether material progress could ever lead to a true understanding of life. The very idea that prosperity could bring inner peace seemed absurd to him.

After returning from Europe, Tolstoy opened a school for peasants' children on his estate at Yasnaya Polyana. He was concerned about the plight of the poor, and tried to improve their lives through education. The early success of his teaching methods led him to publish a pedagogical magazine outlining his educational theories. But soon he concluded that he had no right to teach children, because he did not know what to teach them.

The family man and the search for God

In 1862, Tolstoy married Sonya Bers. At first the two had a happy marriage, which seemed to have saved him from deep internal distress. Although he enjoyed life with his wife and children, he began to worry about increasing his income. His former striving after perfection gave way to trying to make it "as comfortable as possible for me and my family."[2] This period, lasting some 15 years, was perhaps Tolstoy's most creative time: he produced the masterpieces *War and Peace,* and *Anna Karenina.* Soon, however, Tolstoy was in a spiritual crisis again. He had happiness and love, well-being and glory, but found himself in a blind alley. "My life came to a standstill," he wrote. "It was as though I had just been living and walking along, and had come to an abyss, where I saw clearly that there was nothing ahead but perdition. And it was impossible to stop and go back, and impossible to shut my eyes, in order that I might not see that there was nothing ahead but suffering and imminent death—complete annihilation."[3]

To find a new, better faith, Tolstoy renewed his quest for God. He started attending church, and following all the rituals. He rejected Besukhov's theory that "life is everything—life is God." Instead, he submitted himself to the traditional imperative: "God is everything. God is life."

However, he found it impossible to accept an unquestioning faith. The Orthodox religious services (especially the Eucharist), worshiping of icons and relics, and belief in miracles deeply embarrassed and provoked him. More and more, Tolstoy believed that Christianity, overloaded with false weights of history, had lost its apostolic simplicity. So he set out to refine Christianity from all its burdensome and alien elements, and to discover the true teachings of Christ. Thus he wrote in 1880, *An Examination of Dogmatic Theology,* an analysis and a critique of the dogmas of the Orthodox Church, a step that would eventually lead to his being disfellowshipped.

A year later, Tolstoy published another critical work, trying to reconstruct the Gospels as he understood them. Like in his earlier works on religion, Tolstoy discarded what did not agree with his discernment and retained what he thought would contribute to a better understanding of the world.

Tolstoy's relationship to Christianity, especially to the Bible, has always posed a dilemma for Christians. On the one hand, he was a spiritually sensitive person seeking to live by high moral standards. On the other, he rejected traditional Christianity and attempted to create a new religion. He denied Christ's divinity and equated Him with Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, and other sages. He even sought to rewrite the gospels.

How, then, shall we understand Tolstoy's contradictions? Before trying to give an answer, we should remember that Tolstoy, in his pursuit of an educational approach, turned to the teachings of the Bible.

Tolstoy the educator

Tolstoy's early appreciation of, and

approach to, the Bible is best seen in his educational work and pedagogic methods. In the 1860s, he felt that the Scriptures had a positive contribution to make in the education of children. "Without the Bible the development of a child or a man is unthinkable in our society," he wrote, "just as it was unthinkable in Greek society without Homer. The Bible is the first book for the first reading of children. The Bible, both as to its contents and to its form, ought to serve as a model of all manuals and readers for children."[4]

Tolstoy not only insisted on the inclusion of the Bible in the school's curriculum, but was also determined to give it a special place. For example, he argued that the Bible provides the child with a cosmic history—"holy history," he called it. From that cosmic overview, the child should be helped to understand Russian history. "There is no book like the Bible," he wrote, "to open up a new world to the pupil and to make him without knowledge love knowledge. I speak even of those who do not look upon the Bible as a revelation. At least, there's no production that I know of, that unites all the sides of human thought in such a compressed poetical form as is to be found in the Bible. All the questions from the phenomena of Nature are explained by this book; all the primitive relations of men with each other, of the family, of the state, of religion, are for the first time consciously recognized in this book."[5]

Tolstoy believed that the Bible owed its influence to its powerful poetry and narratives. "The lyricism of David's psalms acts not only upon the minds of grown pupils, but everybody for the first time learns from this book the whole charm of the epos in its inimitable simplicity and strength. Who has not wept over the story of Joseph and his meeting with his brothers? Who has not narrated with a sinking heart the story of Samson bound and deprived of his hair, as he, taking vengeance on his enemies, himself perishes under the ruins of the fallen palace, and a hundred other impressions, on which we have been brought up as on our mothers' milk?"[6]

Tolstoy insisted that the Bible contains a unique potential for training moral people. He stated that nobody ever could produce a book that could compete with the Bible, especially in its narratives about the origin of the world, of humanity, and of history. Hence his plea that Bible should be translated into simple language, without reducing its authority. He condemned tinkering with the Scripture. "The omissions in the Sacred History are quite unintelligible and only impair the character and beauty of the Holy Scripture."[7] Tolstoy was against any translator omitting what seemed unsuitable or irrational. Enigmatic passages such as those found in Genesis should not be omitted: "the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters"; "God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life"; creating Eve from Adam's rib; the saying that the finished Creation was "very good"; and the expression "the evening and the morning was."[8]

These passages and other difficult ones did not cause Tolstoy to doubt the authority of the Bible. He wanted the Bible to tell the holy history without any interference. "I neither changed nor omitted even one single word. . . . How understandable and clear everything is told in the Bible, especially for the child and along with that how strictly and seriously!...I can not imagine for myself, how education could be possible without this book?"[9]

With such positive views about the Bible as Tolstoy held during his experiments in education, what changed him so radically during the latter part of his life? Part of the answer is to be found in his humanistic preoccupation with what he called "the religion of life."

Tolstoy the humanist

At the basis of Tolstoy's latter approach to religion lay a humanistic understanding of life—that humans have within them the capacity to understand the meaning and purpose of existence. Within every human being, Tolstoy believed, there is a higher and a lower nature. The latter often gets individuals and communities into mischief. But if the higher nature unites and fellowships with a greater power—namely, God—human beings can live life to its fullness.

Through two decades of Tolstoy's life one can follow his steady movement toward a self-made mystical humanism. After much study and meditation on the New Testament, He claimed to have found the essential principle that characterized the life of Jesus—"Resist not evil." From the reading of the Bible, he formulated a five-part commandment that one needed to obey to have an optimum life. The parts are: Do not be angry; do not lust; do not bind yourself by oaths; do not resist one that is evil; be good to the just and the unjust.

As he began fashioning his own religion, Tolstoy dismissed the Old Testament as "the strange faith of the Jews," even though he had used some of its great stories in his pedagogic experiments. Even in using the New Testament, he was selective and tentative. He had no place for the Book of Revelation, dismissing it as carrying tales of "nonsense." Only the Gospels interested him, but even there he felt certain portions needed corrections.

Tolstoy became increasingly fascinated by the biblical portrayal of Jesus' life of simplicity and love. Feeling an inner call to such a life, he renounced his worldly belongings. This brought frequent quarrels with his wife, who reminded him of his responsibility for her future and the well-being of their 13 children. Tolstoy solved the problem by deeding his property to his wife and living a simple life with his peasants.

In "The Kingdom of God Is Within You," Tolstoy argued that God is within

the heart of each individual and will reveal Himself in each individual striving for perfection. From this he derived a philosophy of history that is largely determined by the moral development of individuals. The world will eventually reach its blissful state through this growing moral perfection of individuals who observe the supreme law of love and abjure every form of violence.

Tolstoy the complex person

Viewed from any angle, Tolstoy is a complex individual—difficult to dissect or analyze. During his early pedagogical activity, he saw a need for the Bible in guiding young minds. Later, when he lost interest in education, he could not reconcile the pomp and the pride of the church with the call of the New Testament to live a simple life. He thought of himself as a nominal Christian, living according to the ethic of the Bible, as he understood it. Eventually he rejected the miracles and the divinity of Christ. This led him to develop a gospel of his own, purified of everything of what he thought was supernatural and false. Here, again, one can sense the humanist at work, as Tolstoy declared that we can accept only those things that "are told by the reason because it was given to man directly from God." Therefore, the only authority in questions of religion and faith should be the human, and not God. This understanding brought Tolstoy to the point of creating a new, personal religion, based not on divine revelation, but on the mind.

So, how are we to understand Tolstoy's relationship to the Bible? The question begs another question: Which Tolstoy? If we think of Tolstoy the educationist, we certainly see someone who believed that the Bible had a positive role to play in the development of young people, revealing how to live a moral life, close to God. If we think of Tolstoy the mystical humanist and the absolute moralist, we meet a person of complexity—torn within, tossed about, searching for a place to rest but never arriving, placing confidence in the human ability to know the eternal Mind, and asserting that no one can attain perfection.

Almost a century after his death, Tolstoy still impresses us with the sheer force of his literary genius and his persistent struggle for moral perfection. However, his rejection of the Bible as a divinely inspired book led him to fashion his own personal religion, ultimately rejecting Him who declared "'I am the way and the truth and the life'" (John 14:6, NIV).

Victor Liakhou teaches Russian literature at Zaokski Theological Seminary in Russia. His mailing address: Rudneva Street, 43-A; 301000 Zaoksky, Tula Region; Russia. E-mail: liakhou@zaoksem.tula.net

Notes and references:

1. Lev N. Tolstoy, *My Confession.* Translated and edited by Leo Wiener (London: J. M. Dent & Co.).
2. Ibid., p. 16.
3. Ibid., p. 19.
4. Lev N. Tolstoy, *Pedagogical Articles.* Translated by Leo Wiener (Boston: Dana Estes & Company, 1904), pp. 311, 312.
5. Ibid., pp. 310, 311.
6. Ibid., p. 311.
7. Ibid., p. 308.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., pp. 308, 309.