Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) is best known for his novels *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*. However, he was also an outspoken religious thinker, educationist, activist, and pacifist. He published numerous essays and pamphlets on a range of moral and religious issues including his own translation of the gospels and attacks on the Orthodox Church, from which he was eventually excommunicated. He believed his mission was to follow and explicate a simple religion based on God, love, and Jesus’ teaching consistent with, but not based upon, contemporary knowledge. He was dissatisfied with the notion of progress of the time and saw a spiritual need that was not being addressed by the Church, which he despised most of all for its part in war, the horrors of which he witnessed first hand in the Crimea as a young man. He rejected the resurrection, incarnation, miracles, and public worship. He believed that Jesus had taught that prayer should be private and that orthodox Christianity in all its forms was nonsensical and counter-productive: ‘religion is not a belief, settled once and for all in certain supernatural occurrences supposed to have taken place once upon a time, nor in the necessity for certain prayers and ceremonies’ (What is religion? in Tolstoy 1934, 281).

Tolstoy, in principle, did not adhere to any denomination or dissenting group. He saw the mere existence of these divisions as a reason not to believe in any of them and noted that these divisions can only turn people, particularly ‘all our young people making this search’, to ask the question: ‘why is the truth not Lutheranism not in Catholicism, but in Orthodoxy?’ (My confession in Tolstoy 1904, Vol. XIII, 83).

Tolstoy, however, was not a secular ethicist either; he predicted the demise of secular humanist societies because he believed an understanding of God was necessary for morality which essentially could not be rationalized. Tolstoy saw the teachings of the Churches and secular philosophies alike as impediments to a true understanding of life.

In his attempt to find the true meaning of life and to get back to the ‘real’ teachings of Jesus, Tolstoy read through the gospels and marked the parts of Jesus’ teaching that agreed with his own experience and conscience. In particular he was influenced by the Sermon on the Mount. He believed that the gospel message could be reduced to five simple precepts: not to be angry; not to lust; not to give away control of future actions; not to injure others who act in
a way we disapprove; and to love our enemies. Tolstoy believed that to follow these rules was the meaning of life, the ‘aim of life is to cooperate with the father [God] in doing good’ (Maude 1902, 20). He saw these principles as incompatible with government and believed that an established church could not be morally justified: ‘The words “Christian state” resemble the words “hot ice”. Such an entity is either not a state, or it is not Christian’ (Moore 2006, 191). For Tolstoy, Jesus was a pacifist radical, not someone to merely be believed in as God’s son, but someone to be followed: the kingdom of God was something to be built on Earth by humans living in union with Jesus’ teaching and one another.

"Christianity in Its True Sense"

Extracted from "Tolstoy the Peculiar Christian Anarchist"

by Alexandre Christoyannopoulos

Leo Tolstoy was born in a wealthy, aristocratic family in 1828. In the 1850s, 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 realized 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.
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. 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 realized, 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.

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 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 (anti-supernatural) 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 rationalized 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: he eliminated all irrational additives, harmonized any conflicting accounts, and rearranged Jesus’ life in a logical chronological narrative. In this gospel according 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 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.

These complete essays may be found at:
http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bright/tolstoy/chrisanar.htm

Two other interesting, but less kind, essays may be found here:
http://www.creationism.org/csshs/v09n2p27.htm