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**Jefferson and Tolstoy:
Scriptural Revision**

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Abstract of the Thesis

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Thomas Jefferson and Leo Tolstoy – totally independent of each other – somehow managed to approach the Bible (both Old Testament and New) in a remarkably similar way. Their insistence on shifting the focus of Christianity back to its central figure was seen as scandalous, and remains so for many, since it necessarily does away with the miraculous parts of the Gospels, the very parts that seem to have defined the religion throughout the centuries. Rather than be content with traditional biblical scholarship, they took on the dangerous task of editing, rearranging, and even rewriting the Gospels to conform to their beliefs. Still, Jefferson’s “Bible” is virtually forgotten, and Tolstoy’s reputation to this day seems to rest solely on his works of fiction. By looking at the religious writings of these two men, examining how they came upon their philosophies and how they influenced others, I hope to add a new dimension to these two figures who were so similar in belief but so wildly different in temperament. In addition, because we have so little of Jefferson’s religious work and so much of Tolstoy’s, I aim to show how Tolstoy went even further than his American counterpart, in a desperate hope of recapturing Christianity as a practical philosophy rather than a mystical religion – a hope that he found difficult to enact but pursued until his dying day.

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1.

In the 19th century, Thomas Jefferson and Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy – totally independent of each other – set out to rewrite the canonical Gospels, and thereby reshape Christianity itself. Though they remain enormously influential figures, they seem to be somewhat forgotten today as religious philosophers. The story of these two men, whose works on Christianity are separated by more than half a century, is made all the more astonishing when one considers the similarity of their methods and the difference in their motives. Both set out to revise the Gospels, both believed themselves to be rescuing Jesus from the hands of the churches, but where Jefferson did his work as a solitary spiritual exercise, Tolstoy was desperate to effect global change. And though they are revered today, they dealt with considerable hostility even before the publication of their religious works. Jefferson, whose *Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* was published a century after his death, was well-known during his public life as a Deist to whom the Bible was no more or less a divine document than the Declaration of Independence, and he frequently found himself deflecting attacks of atheism and heresy. Tolstoy, in his later years, turned quickly from the representative of Russian excellence to the rest of the world to an implacable antagonist of the Russian Empire and its Orthodox Church. To look into the religious explorations of these two men, regardless of whether or not one agrees with their conclusions,

is to encounter a rare species of literary courage. They did not seek to refute the sanctity of the Bible altogether, but, rather, sought to isolate what they believed crucial in it and excise the rest. The Gospels came along to revise the Hebrew Bible, and Jefferson and Tolstoy came along to revise the Gospels. But, as we shall see, Tolstoy regarded the Gospels with an even greater ambivalence than did Jefferson, and so the Russian count would approach his revision with even more boldness than the American President.

Tolstoy the writer of fiction underwent a transformation from the ambitious, meditative novels to the stripped-down narrative of *Hadji Murat*. Tolstoy the writer of religious philosophy underwent a similar change: from the tortured, searching soul of *A Confession* who turned over every facet of his Christian Orthodoxy in search of a kernel of truth, to the decisive philosopher we see in his later religious works, who stripped away from the Gospels any material he considered superfluous or antithetical to his views. He felt that he'd arrived at (or recaptured) a truth that would overrule the dogma of the preceding 1,800 years. In his view, Christian theology, as it has been practiced, is not only a farce but also a severe hindrance, and the Jewish tradition upon which it is built is totally irrelevant. "Both," he tells us in *A Gospel in Brief*, "are repugnant and foreign" to the true faith (23). If Christianity is to be true to its name, Tolstoy says, its focus can rest on one aspect of the Gospels and one aspect only – the teachings of its central figure. This is where one finds the basic point of intersection for Tolstoy and Jefferson – the centrality of Jesus of Nazareth, and the

practicality of his words. That is, Jesus as the creator of the story rather than a character in someone else's story.

It is this aspect of the New Testament that Tolstoy believed humanity either lost, ignored, or misread. This has resulted in a fractured Christianity, whose multiplicity of interpretation creates confusion and war. It may call itself Christianity, Tolstoy asserts, but it only takes what it wants from the Gospels and discards what is inconvenient for one social order or another. What is invariably discarded, and what is paramount in Tolstoy's view, is Christ's Sermon on the Mount conveyed in Matthew 5 through 7, and the Sermon on the Plain, from Luke 6. Everything else, from the Virgin Birth to the various miracles to the resurrection, is of no concern. "The kingdom of God is among you," says Jesus to the Pharisees in Luke 17:21, and it is this phrase that helped to form Tolstoy's conception of Christ's message as a practical theory of life rather than a mystical religion, a spiritual doctrine "not promising future bliss but giving bliss on earth" (Tolstoy, *A Confession* 12).

By the time Tolstoy hit his midlife spiritual crisis, he had already composed the works that would secure his reputation. But he took little satisfaction in these achievements, and even less in the direction his life was taking. In 1884's *What I Believe*, he lamented that he lived most of his years as a Nihilist – not a social or political Nihilist, but a spiritual one, whose defining characteristic is a lack of faith. He posed arguments to himself, grappled with contradictions, and alternated between understanding and despair. "Thus I reached the only conclusion I could reach," he says in *A Confession*. "Force is force,

matter is matter, will is will, the infinite is the infinite, nothing is nothing; and I could go no further than that” (52). These circular formulas are strangely reminiscent of God’s answer when Moses questions him as to his identity: “*Ehyeh asher ehyeh*,” translated alternately as “I am who I am,” “I am that I am,” and even “I will be that I will be.” Moses put forward a rational question and got an answer that was both illuminating and confusing at the same time. Rational thought is finite thought and cannot adequately deal with the infinite. Or, as Tolstoy puts it, “philosophical knowledge denies nothing but simply replies that it cannot solve the question” (53). The only logical alternative was to approach the problem from an irrational angle, and so he immersed himself in the study and meditation of what he considered mankind’s oldest irrationality: faith. It helps to remember here that Jefferson had no such crisis of spirit to lead him to his work, at least none that he shared with the world. Where Tolstoy, during his middle and late years, lived a life of relatively solitary contemplation, Jefferson played a central role in the formation of a new country. His involvement in America’s Revolution, his work in Paris just before the French Revolution, and his ascent to the presidency undoubtedly left him little time for the kind of existential despair that sparked Tolstoy’s journey. The stark contrast in the lives they led certainly played a role in forming the differing temperaments with which they enacted their philosophies—Jefferson’s quiet, modest balance versus Tolstoy’s feverish restlessness.

We find publication difficulties in the religious works of both men. In the case of Jefferson, though his ideas certainly alienated some, censorship came not

from without, but from within. Drawing on what we know about his feelings on religion in general – that it was a private enterprise, that it was the business of no other person, let alone of a government body – it’s not surprising to learn that he had no intention of ever having his “Bible” published at all. He left it in the care of his family, and it was not published until 1904, and then only in a limited edition meant for distribution among the members of the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives. As a result of this dubious publication history, Jefferson’s most renowned contribution to religious thought remains his adamant pursuit of the separation between religion and politics – starting with his Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom – which became part of the very architecture of American life. But the “Jefferson Bible” clearly springs from the same apprehension as his church/state philosophy – that religion practiced modestly, privately, would be difficult to pervert; but religion practiced by crowds, by throngs, with an inflated sense of entitlement and certainty, was contrary to the idea of democracy that he was desperate to enact.

Modesty seemed to be an overriding trait of Jefferson’s personality towards the close of the 18th century. To begin with, he had to be coaxed into higher political office upon his return from Paris, and though his ideas of religion were fully formed, he was not especially anxious about having to formulate those ideas himself. He was perfectly happy to have come up with the idea of splicing together the appropriate sections of the Gospels, but wanted his friend, the British scientist and theologian Joseph Priestly, to undertake the work. Priestly, in his old age and infirmity, was unwilling to take on this task, and so, quite remarkably,

Jefferson took it up during his presidency. I say “remarkably” because, though we certainly live in a much different country than Jefferson did, it is nevertheless mind-boggling to think of a president using his free time to brood so deeply into Scripture as to attempt to rearrange its very nature. That he kept it so close to his heart, with no intention of revealing it to the public, can be understood in two ways. First, because of the furious backlash from the more conservative politicians – from the drafting of his famous statute right through to his presidency – he must’ve understood that to make public his views on Christ would prove too scandalous to do anyone any good. But secondly, and more importantly, Jefferson’s refusal to publish his “Bible” secures his reputation as a man who desperately wanted to keep religion as far away from politics as possible. So closely did he guard this work of his that his family only learned of it upon examining his letters after his death.

In Tolstoy’s case, the more he thought into Christianity, the more radical his ideas became, and these ideas made him an enemy of the state. His religious books were published in Russia in edited form, or else not at all. Though the substance of his philosophy sprung from the modesty of the Russian peasants, he had no intention of keeping his convictions to himself. He felt himself to be an old soul in a strange, new world, and his previous literary triumphs could serve no purpose other than to open a door for his new works. One of the most deeply affecting moments in his life occurred during a trip to Paris, where he was witness to several executions. Regardless of the crimes that precipitated this punishment, Tolstoy searched within himself and could find no justification for this quick

separation of the head from the body of the criminals, which he characterized as a “crime.” He was suddenly unable or unwilling to distinguish between one breed of violence from another, and decided that “judgments on what is good and necessary must not be based on what other people say and do, or on progress, but on the instincts of [his] own soul” (26).

It was during this mid-life spiritual crisis that Tolstoy noticed two stark attitudes of faith around him. The first was the faith of his circle of acquaintances – particularly theologians of various Orthodoxies – whose superstitions served to hide their fears of loss and of death, and in Tolstoy’s eyes, amounted to “epicurean consolations” (58). Jefferson might have raised an eyebrow at this description, as Epicurus was one of his favorite philosophers, and one who he felt suffered the same bad critical tradition as Jesus of Nazareth. In a late letter to William Short, his Private Secretary in France, Jefferson wrote, “I too am an Epicurian. I consider the genuine (not the imputed) doctrines of Epicurus as containing everything rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us” (Jefferson, *Writings*, 1,430). In fact, Jefferson apparently wrote out a version of the doctrines of Epicurus in the same vein as he had with the Gospels, hoping to rescue the Greek from the “misrepresentations” of Cicero and the Stoics. The most we have of it is a short syllabus tacked on to the end of the letter to Short, but we can assume that Jefferson sought to unburden Epicureanism of its hedonistic connotations. Tolstoy likely meant “epicurean” as we use it today, to signify sensual indulgence. But Epicurus preached a temperance bordering on asceticism, something that the elder Russian count would have been quick to get

behind. Thus, he saw the faith of this first group as a flimsy defense against the unpleasant realities of life – a false and temporary comfort – and so he continued his search.

The second faith he encountered was that of the monks and peasants. They shared the superstitions of the first group, but these superstitions were “so interconnected with their lives that they could not have conceived of life without them; they were a necessary condition of their lives” (Tolstoy, *A Confession*, 58). Tolstoy’s disdain for his circle led him to loathe the casual believer who separates life from faith, who practices the rituals by rote, who makes a spectacle of his or her faith (an attitude shared by the god of the Old Testament). This, in turn, led him to Christ’s Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth....Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (*The Access Bible*, Matthew 5:5-8). The Russian peasants were the key for Tolstoy, and he would spend much of the rest of his life in their company, learning from them in hopes of acquiring the purity of heart that he felt would give meaning to life. That the truth could be far off and take great effort was now less terrifying for him, and the perpetual “striving toward a fuller understanding and fulfillment” of the truth became one of the central virtues of this new Christianity (Tolstoy, *Kingdom*, 60). Much like Born Again Christians today, Tolstoy found a distinct righteousness in the transition from a lower level towards an unattainable perfection. “It is in this sense,” he says, “that the lost sheep is dearer to the Father than those that were not lost” (88). Notice that Tolstoy never deals in absolutes (unless, of course, he’s talking about non-resistance); he uses “fuller” and “deeper” because he doesn’t

want to intimate perfection. Infallibility and perfection fall under the domain of the churches, and Tolstoy scorns churches for this very reason.

But during the process of reacquainting himself with Christianity, he found his attention always falling back on one idea – the doctrine of non-resistance to evil as spelled out in Matthew 5: “Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well.” Tolstoy would dedicate much of the rest of his life to analyzing and promoting this idea while crying out against the church’s millennia-long occlusion of it. He set up the Sermon on the Mount as a binary opposite to the Nicene Creed: “One cannot believe in both,” he wrote, “and Churchmen have chosen the latter.” He lamented that the Sermon was often left out of church prayers, arguing that congregations were being taught to believe “in a God, in a Christ coming again in glory to judge and punish the quick and the dead” (67). Tolstoy felt this to be contrary to his view of a God of Love, and feared that people would simply be confounded by the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King were all touched and transformed by this idea, and there are still people scattered throughout the world today whose sole dedication to Christianity comes through Tolstoy’s mediation. Over a span of about twenty years, he wrote almost exclusively on this subject, first relating his spiritual crisis in *A Confession*, then closely interpreting Christ’s words in relation to society in *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, and finally rewriting the scriptures altogether as a condensed single gospel in *The Gospel in Brief*, “purged of dogmas and mysticism” (*A Confession*,

12). Tolstoy could not envision a thriving humanity if it was to be governed by so disjointed a text. But his newfound modesty of spirit had no choice but to give way to a literary audacity. And so, as his biographer A.N. Wilson says, he “could not approach the Gospels without a compulsion to rewrite them” (Wilson, 318). Having voraciously torn through all the biblical arguments that 19th-century European theologians had to offer, from David Friedrich Strauss to Ernest Renan, Tolstoy was unsatisfied and found that he would have to go even further than simply ignoring Christ’s divinity. Strauss may have suggested that Christ never meant to insinuate himself into a Holy Trinity, but Wilson characterizes Tolstoy’s response as “*Nu i chto zh?*” which translates as “Well, so what, then?” To Tolstoy, this scholarly debate was lively but could amount to nothing more than further debate. He was well aware that he needed to cut away the miraculous, but this was only the first step; the process had to yield a new product that could surpass mere theoretical reflection and jump right into practical application. To see Tolstoy ignore so many of the ideas of Christianity that have become central, the interpretation he ultimately settled upon, in the eyes of many, could hardly be called Christianity at all. In his view, however, he was helping to reclaim Jesus as a moral philosopher. He does not simply ignore the Hebrew Bible, The New Testament, and the preceding 1,800 years of belief; he reproaches them for being in direct opposition to Christ’s truth. Though there is little room for mystery in Tolstoy’s doctrine (except perhaps for the question of how it is to be enacted throughout the world), it does make one wonder how he came to settle so

conclusively on one single aspect at the expense of almost everything else. How did Christ's Sermon on the Mount achieve ultimate authority in Tolstoy's mind?

2.

It helps to examine those traditions that Tolstoy felt were hindering the world's understanding of the truth. The first and most obvious is the Hebrew Bible and its personification of God. God, of course, changes from source to source, but our earliest understanding of him is of an unpredictable father, capable of both great mercy and great wrath, who seems to be improvising his way through the creation and sustaining of humanity. In Exodus 20 through 23, he makes his law very explicit: "...Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe" (Exodus, 21:23-35). Furthermore, capital punishment is fit for crimes ranging from murder to kidnapping to cursing one's father or mother. Whether the spirit of fairness and the spirit of Yahweh are reconcilable is open to endless debate, but for Tolstoy, the world's understanding of fairness and justice has been perverted. Christianity's reliance on the Hebrew Bible as its foundation is the beginning of Tolstoy's problem. The warrior god, for instance, who assures the Israelites that he will fight for them, and that they "have only to keep still" (14:14), is irreconcilable with Tolstoy's vision of a God of Love. Inconsistency of behavior

is a human trait, and the “human, all-too-human” God of the Old Testament, as Harold Bloom characterizes him, is too schizophrenic a creation for Tolstoy to believe in. Jefferson similarly scorns the Hebrew tradition, though he doesn’t go into nearly as much detail, presumably because his agenda isn’t as specific as Tolstoy’s. The Jews, he believed, went along in a “degraded state” and were ripe for reformation (*The Jefferson Bible*, 333). So, when we hear pundits today in America such as Ann Coulter claim that Christians are essentially perfected Jews, however vulgar it may seem to an enlightened mind, they are essentially correct in terms of that peculiar Judeo-Christian cosmos.

When the New Testament comes along to revise the Old, Yahweh the warrior god is written out. God the Father – an old man with a white beard, a cloud in the sky, what you will – is a different phenomenon, though equally unacceptable for Tolstoy. God is no longer content to show himself or to speak through a chosen person; he sends himself, or a part of himself, down to earth to experience birth, love, pain, and death. Christians must see Christ’s words as the unfiltered, invariable word of God, because Christ *is* God. Stone tablets are not needed. Bloom, in his recent book *Jesus and Yahweh: The Names Divine*, suggests that Jesus dies on the cross still a fervent Jew, perhaps the last true Jew, believing in the Hebrew Covenant. He goes on to say that “from St. Paul onward, believers have seen Jesus as the inventor of a New Covenant, but [that] they may have confused the messenger with the message” (Bloom, 27), although for many, the messenger *is* the message. Bloom’s argument seems to focus around the tendency for parable that Jesus and Yahweh share, but doesn’t question why Jesus

contradicts and overrules Yahweh more often than he agrees with him. Both Jefferson and Tolstoy believed Christianity to have been corrupted, and they both believe that this corruption began with Paul. When they looked back at nearly two millennia of biblical interpretation, they felt that Jesus' sensible, earthly philosophy had been drowned out by attention to miracles, parables, and stories of divine guilt and accountability.

In *Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God*, Jack Miles also notes Jesus' use of parables, but feels the similarity ends there. He puts great emphasis on the story of the Samaritan in Matthew 5, in which Jesus doesn't simply say something that contradicts the old law; he invokes the old law in an "explicitly revisionist statement....a repudiation of the jealousy that [God] made his defining characteristic in the first words of his revelation at Mount Sinai" (Miles, 182). This brazen revision was almost as crucial to Tolstoy as the doctrine of non-resistance to evil, and indeed the two principles are closely related. The idea of nationalism and of nations in general was contrary to his view of Christianity. The borders between countries may as well be the remnants of the angry Hebrew god's scattering of his people, and it breeds ignorance, exclusion and war. "Christianity in its true sense puts an end to government....destroys its very foundations," he says (*Kingdom*, 209-210). Needless to say, the elder Tolstoy would have found Jefferson's political work despicable – the creation of borders, the formation of governments, the collecting of taxes – but Jefferson did not take the same liberties of interpretation that Tolstoy did. It might be more accurate to call Jefferson a redactor of the Gospels (though redacting may as well be a form of revision),

while Tolstoy does the triple-duty of reader/translator/interpreter. The essential revision of the Hebrew Bible for Tolstoy is still the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus revises, amends, or else completely shoots down various aspects of the old law by beginning each commandment with some variation of “You have heard it said...”

To return to my earlier question, why is it so natural for Tolstoy to disregard the Hebrew God for his contradictory nature, while believing in the authority of Christ, who comes to us with contradictions of his own? A good start to the answer lies in the original subtitle of *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, curiously left out of more recent English translations: *Christianity Not as a Mystic Religion but as a New Theory of Life*. Tolstoy did not trust the Gospels for many reasons. In his mind, the church, through almost 2,000 years of selective reading and aggressive conversionary tactics, has occluded the essence of a series of texts that were problematic to begin with. In the introduction to *The Gospel in Brief*, Tolstoy tells us that “the reader must not forget that Jesus never Himself wrote a book...that He, moreover, did not, as Socrates did, transmit His teaching to informed and literate men, but spoke to a crowd of illiterate men; and that only a long time after His death men began to write down what they had heard from Him” (20-21). He goes on to tell us that, though the Gospels offered him “life-giving water,” it came with “much mire and slime unrightfully mingled therewith” (23). Examining Jefferson’s few writings on the subject, we find that he used similar metaphors when referring to his separation of the philosophical from the miraculous. Writing to William Short in 1819, he describes his work as “abstracting what is really [Jesus’] from the rubbish in which it is buried...as

separable from that as the diamond from the dunghill” (*Writings*, 326). The task they had set upon, and the proper task of all readers, in their eyes, was to cut through the clutter of “Hebraism and the Church, both of which are repugnant” to the truth of the Gospels (Tolstoy, *Kingdom*, 23). For them, the greatest obstacle to reaching this truth was the literalization of such fragmentary and dubious texts. The answer to this problem was the stripping away of Christ’s divinity. In *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, Tolstoy explicitly equates the miraculous with the incomprehensible. The core of the teaching is nothing miraculous, and neither is its transmission from Jesus to his disciples, yet the Gospel authors still felt that a supernatural framework was needed to reinforce its authority. Instead, Tolstoy says, this framework hypnotizes the reader and distracts him or her from the truth. In this view, Jesus was not God, because a god coming down to earth to lay down the law would be able to convey it without any risk of misinterpretation. There would be no debates over meaning, no breaking off into opposing sects.

Here is where the meeting of Tolstoy’s and Jefferson’s philosophies exhibits another remarkable similarity. Both men reiterated their views of the Gospels by the frequent use of the word “incomprehensible.” In Jefferson’s case, the idea came to him early on, most likely through the works of Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke, who saw nothing in the divine aspects of both Testaments that could appeal to human reason. Why, after all, would a benevolent Supreme Being for centuries make himself known only to a select group of people, “[leaving] the rest of mankind without god in the world”? (*Jefferson’s Extracts*, 6) Bolingbroke found a lack of dignity in the story of the fall of man and the

subsequent Christian redemption. Furthermore, he felt that the history of the world since Jesus' death should make any reasonable person scoff at the notion of his divinity and to "assume that the son of god, who was sent by the father to make a new covenant with mankind, and to establish a new kingdom on the ruins of paganism, executed his commission imperfectly" (7). Jefferson read these lines as a young man and they stayed with him forever, judging by the amount of space given to Bolingbroke in his *Commonplace Book*, a personal collection of literary and philosophical extracts. This shows that Jefferson and Tolstoy were far from the first to detest religious superstition, but even the boldest Enlightenment thinkers would not have dared to trifle with what were considered sacred texts.

In Tolstoy's eyes, the Church was the first enemy of a true Christianity. Doubtless he saw this as an outrageous irony, however tragic, but it was not an irony fit for comic exploitation from such a serious writer. For him, the foundation of even a single church was the first misstep leading to the world's ongoing affliction. He cites Matthew 23:9 as a clear warning against the foundation of churches, which finds Jesus warning the crowds, "Call no one your father on earth for you have one Father—the one in heaven." "Nothing like the idea of the Church as we know it now," Tolstoy says, "with its sacraments, miracles, and above all its claim to infallibility, is to be found either in Christ's words or in the ideas of the men of that time" (*Kingdom*, 51). Then later: "While believers were agreed among themselves and the body was one, it had no need to declare itself as a church. It was only when believers were split into opposing parties, renouncing one another, that it seemed necessary to each party to confirm their own truth by

ascribing to themselves infallibility” (53). This period of agreement must have been very short-lived indeed. In no time at all people were being labeled as heretics, religion and commerce were suspiciously intermingling, and – perhaps the most outrageous vulgarity in Tolstoy’s eyes, and any reasonable person’s – lives were being snuffed out in the name of a man who preached peace and forgiveness.

Everything that Tolstoy found dubious in the Gospels’ presentation of Jesus – the virgin birth, the resurrection, the water into wine – was now considered divine. Everything that he felt was divine about Jesus – namely the message – was submerged underneath gross misinterpretation. Tolstoy sought to dig the message out and dust off its centuries’ accumulation of muck, which he came closest to doing in 1896’s *The Gospel in Brief*. After his provocative introduction, he presents his condensed version of the Gospels. Though he keeps the general timeline intact, he moves freely between the four accounts, marking the corresponding chapters and verses in the margins, and cutting away everything that does not have to do with Christ’s teachings. But it is not simply a matter of editing; he is translating from the Greek, and he takes certain liberties in this regard. David Matual, in his study on the philosophical intersection between Tolstoy and Pierre Joseph Proudhon, cites a remarkable passage at the start of *The Gospel*. It was part of a prologue that was not included in the first edition of the book, which could not be published in its entirety (as many of Tolstoy’s later books could not), but was included in a second edition several years later. It is a strange translation of John 1:1, but, as Matual notes, it seems to be fundamental to

Tolstoy's conception of religion. The original words are well-known: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Tolstoy translates, or re-imagines, this as: "The understanding of life [i.e. the *logos*] has become the principle of all things, and the understanding of life has come to take the place of God. And the understanding of life has become God" (Matual 119-120). The Word of John's Gospel becomes "the rational principle that inheres in each man" (119), and so the burden of responsibility is placed on the individual. Similar to Emerson's Gnostic notion of "the god within," it effectively removes the external deity so that all that is left is each person's internalization of the message. "Do your work, and I shall know you," says Emerson in *Self-Reliance*. "Do your work, and you shall reinforce yourself" (Emerson, 264). This could easily be the slogan of Tolstoy's Jesus. The conduit is irrelevant; what is transmitted is everything. It's safe to say that, in the end, Tolstoy did not even know or care to know whether a man named Jesus even spoke the words attributed to him. The point was that *somebody* spoke them, and they had the ring of ultimate truth for him. As A.N. Wilson paraphrases, "even if Christ did not say the words, they are still true, eternally true, morally and absolutely so" (Wilson, 322). The window dressing that accompanied Christ's philosophy should have been totally unnecessary, because in Tolstoy's view, the doctrine of non-resistance was "in itself convincing and in harmony with man's mind and nature" (*Kingdom*, 48).

Jefferson left John's "word" passage out of his "Bible," one of several differences between the two revised Gospels. Ihor Levitsky notes some of these in

a 1979 study, one of the few works written about the philosophical intersection of Tolstoy and Jefferson. He attributes Jefferson's omission of this passage to a dislike for "platonizing mystification" (Levitsky, 352). He suggests that Jefferson's omission of the Temptation of Jesus in Matthew 4 and Luke 4 was simply in keeping with his negation of anything supernatural. But Tolstoy included this episode, though not without considerable revision. It is not so much the devil who tempts Jesus but "the voice of his flesh," and Jesus no longer has anyone to reply to, but instead answers himself (Tolstoy, *Gospel*, 40). This exchange was too important for Tolstoy to omit, Levitsky suggests, but the same supernatural aspect that led Jefferson to leave it out altogether was simply stifled and rewritten by Tolstoy. This way, it becomes "an inner struggle... [demonstrating] the power of the spirit – God – over the flesh – Satan" (Levitsky, 352).

The difficult irony to come to terms with is that, though he wrote with such certainty and authority on the nature of Christ's teachings, he found very little solace in his later years. At times, in these religious works, one can hear him alternating wildly between optimism and pessimism. In Isaiah Berlin's wonderful study of Tolstoy, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, he begins by speculating as to which category Lev fits into. Going by Archilochus' allegory, was he a hedgehog or a fox? Or rather, was he "a monist or a pluralist?" (Berlin, 3) Though Berlin appreciates the difficulty of even posing such a question, he surmises that Tolstoy was a fox by nature, but strove to be a hedgehog. He preached a singularity of vision but, like most of us, found it difficult to enact. He sought to remove

everything supernatural from Christianity, but something in him must have understood that the idea of non-resistance played out on a global scale itself bordered on the supernatural. And though Levitsky doesn't make it explicit, his analysis is informed by Berlin's initial question. Levitsky refers to Tolstoy as being simultaneously "a rationalist and a dualist." The dualist takes the initiative in reworking a story, such as Jesus' temptation, "in order to make it acceptable to the rationalist" (Levitsky, 352).

The irreconcilable fault in Tolstoy's Christianity was finally the insurmountable disconnect between theory and practice. Wilson hit upon it perfectly in his biography, where he finds Tolstoy presenting "a Jesus who is not divine, but whose words *are*" (Wilson, 322). Though the absolutism of the churches was inadequate for Tolstoy, the absolutism of Jesus' philosophy was not only adequate but imperative. For better or worse, he had created a church of his own, one that was blatantly adversarial towards all other churches. He ascribed an indisputable infallibility to his Gospel while ranting against any other claims of scriptural infallibility. This was his second and more loaded Emersonian flourish, also to do with the ultimate authority of the self, though doubtless Tolstoy would not have seen it this way. We see it on the very first page of *Self-Reliance*, when Emerson boldly proclaims that "to believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men,--that is genius" (Emerson, 259). I'm not sure what Emerson would have thought had he seen Tolstoy enacting his philosophy in such a way, particularly the later, harder-edged Emerson of *The Conduct of Life*. If unconditional non-resistance to evil is such an

inherent trait of humanity, as Tolstoy says, if it is so “in harmony with [our] mind and nature,” then we seem to be moving towards it by such tiny increments as to make it imperceptible.

One who was deeply moved by Tolstoy’s ideas was Mahatma Gandhi, who would become perhaps the most famous proponent of non-violence in history, turning theory into reality in a way that Tolstoy could not. It was in the early 1900s that Gandhi got his hands on *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, and it caused in him the same kind of shift that Tolstoy had experienced decades earlier – from “a believer in violence....[to] a firm believer in Ahimsa” (*Essential Gandhi*, 180). The two men kept up a correspondence during this time, after the young Mohandas read and subsequently translated a 1908 letter from Tolstoy to the editor of *Free Hindustan*. Gandhi was profoundly affected by Tolstoy’s assertion that that the situation in India was simply a recurrence of the same kind of travesty that has long plagued humanity. “A commercial company enslaved a nation comprising two hundred millions,” Tolstoy writes. “Tell this to a man free from superstition and he will fail to grasp what these words mean” (Tolstoy, *Recollections*, 436). He thus accused the Indians of taking part in their own enslavement, having ignored or forgotten “the law of love natural to their hearts” (437). Tolstoy did not live to see Indian independence, but he would surely have attributed it to Gandhi’s influence, though the revolution involved disobedience both civil and military.

Tolstoy died in November, 1910, and Gandhi remembered him fondly in his writings. Having heard Tolstoy’s many critics lash out at his contradictions of

personality, the Mahatma didn't hesitate to come to the defense of his late kindred spirit. Henri Troyat, in his 1967 biography of Tolstoy, gives us several examples of the count's constant internal struggle in the face of his difficult philosophy. After the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904, though his followers looked to him for guidance, he felt helpless against the likelihood of so much more bloodshed. Disgusted with journalism meant to incite patriotism, he nevertheless fell prey very quickly himself. "As soon as a guest arrived from Tula, he asked: 'Well? What? What news from the front?'" (Troyat, 615) In an interview with a French journalist, he all but confessed his crisis of conscience, admitting a personal stake in the conflict, "[feeling] every Russian defeat in his bones" (616). Finally, in a diary entry in late 1904, a remarkably blunt self-diagnosis:

The surrender of Port Arthur has made me miserable. I suffer from it. Patriotism. I was brought up in that sentiment and I have not freed myself of it. Nor have I rid myself of personal selfishness or family and even class egotism. All these forms of selfishness are within me, but there is also within me a consciousness of the law of God and that consciousness holds the selfishness in check, so that I cannot yield to it completely. And, little by little, it atrophies. (616)

It makes one wonder what Tolstoy felt to be the ultimate personal goal of such a philosophy. Did he envision a time when people will have completely shed all ego and selfishness, or did he see this ongoing conflict as an inevitable and perhaps even necessary component to his ideal Christianity?

After Tolstoy's death, Gandhi stepped in to defend him against criticisms of inconsistency, even quoting Emerson's famous slogan about foolish

consistency being the hobgoblin of little minds. “Constant development is the law of life,” he wrote, going on to say that he believed Tolstoy to be the most scathing critic of his own shortcomings. Judging by the lament quoted above, it would be hard to argue the point. Though Tolstoy may have had a more disturbed inner life and lacked the discipline of his Indian disciple, they both shared the desire for a constant upward movement, regardless of the obstacles – internal or external – in their way. Even Gandhi himself was prone, however briefly, to reexamine the non-resistance doctrine upon seeing the Second World War take shape. “If there ever could be a justifiable war in the name of and for humanity,” he writes, “a war against Germany, to prevent the wanton persecution of a whole race, would be completely justified” (*The Gandhi Reader*, 318). The philosophy of non-resistance to evil seems to hinge on the idea that there are finally no variations of evil – no real differences in kind, only in degree. Gandhi finds in Hitler a new, unanticipated species of evil, a difference in degree so large that it becomes a difference in kind. He eventually reiterates his opposition to any war, but still illustrates the impossibility of adhering so strictly to such an absolute doctrine. If some of the most disciplined men in history could not give themselves to it completely, it seems impossible that it could be enacted on a scale large enough to make a significant dent in the world.

Compared to Tolstoy’s prodigious output, the fruits of Jefferson’s philosophy were limited to his short “Jefferson Bible,” a small handful of letters, and perhaps the formation of the University of Virginia, which he had hoped would become “a campus...independent of all priests and denominations”

(Hitchens, 172). His religious writings could not have had much more practical application than that, since they were only made public a century after his death. By the 20th century, the character of America had solidified enough that Jefferson's experiment would be a footnote. Whatever contradictions he and Tolstoy may have had, they did stay true to their respective religious outlooks. Jefferson, living his final years very quietly, kept his ideas as close to himself as possible; Tolstoy, living a turbulent life to his death, never stopped preaching the doctrine of non-violence to anyone who would listen.

Tolstoy returned in his final years to historical fiction with the short novel *Hadji Murat*, telling the story of the famed Caucasian rebel. He worked on it for nearly a decade, and it was only published two years after his death. It is noteworthy in that, though Tolstoy criticized Hadji Murat earlier in his life, nowhere in the novel does he judge his hero. It is the kind of work that he would have scorned only several years earlier, which may be why he laid it aside and refused to publish it. Both his major biographers – Troyat and Wilson – agree that it was a peculiar work for Tolstoy to undertake at this time, being “devoid of all religious considerations...at a time when his thoughts were increasingly bent on the propagation of his faith” (Troyat, 606). It shows that, regardless of his meticulously wrought philosophy of life, he remained in constant internal conflict until his death in 1910. In his chapter on Tolstoy in *The Western Canon*, Bloom likens him to King Lear, fleeing his lifelong estate at Yasnaya Polyana, “in a desperate lunge toward an outcast freedom” (Bloom, 313). Though the Tsar spared no expense in tracking down Tolstoy's disciples, the count himself was

untouchable, and Bloom suggests that he desperately sought martyrdom.

However, if Tolstoy was right that “the lost sheep is dearer to the Father,” perhaps he fulfilled his individual obligation to Christ as best he could.

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