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## **Tolstoy's Concept of Happiness in the Light of Faith**

### **Koncepcja szczęścia Lwa Tołstoja w świetle wiary**

#### **ABSTRACT:**

*Happiness does not depend on outward things, but on the way, we see them, wrote Leo Nikolaevich Tolstoy (1828–1910) one of the greatest writers of all times whose literary, philosophical, religious and artistic work transcended boundaries of his native Russia and influenced many of the prominent writers and activists of non-violence, amongst them M Gandhi and Martin L King Jr. In his youth Tolstoy led the life of a wealthy aristocrat who owned 300 serfs and committed many 'sins.' As Tolstoy states in his masterpiece work *Confession* (1879–82) he killed many innocent people in the wars. He could not justify his actions and at the age of 50 Tolstoy went through existential crisis and began the journey in search for the meaning of his life. He read *Gospels* daily, led ascetic lifestyle and created his own concept of 'happiness.' What was 'happiness' for Tolstoy? In the current study I attempt to examine Tolstoy's concept of happiness through the analysis of the *Confession* and the *Sermon on the Mount*.*

#### **KEYWORDS:**

Tolstoy, literature, happiness, *Confession*, *Sermon on the Mount*

#### **STRESZCZENIE:**

„Szczęście nie zależy od rzeczy zewnętrznych, ale od tego, jak je postrzegamy” pisał Lew Tołstoj, jeden z największych pisarzy literatury światowej, którego dzieła, filozofia i przekonania religijne przekraczały granice Rosji i wywierały wpływ na wielu uznanych twórców oraz aktywistów szukających pokojowych rozwiązań konfliktów, wśród nich Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King jr. W młodości Tołstoj prowadził życie bogatego arystokraty, który miał 300 chłopów pańszczyźnianych i liczne grzechy na sumieniu. Jak przyznawał w swoim dziele *Spowiedź*, w czasie wojen zabił wielu niewinnych ludzi, czego nie mógł sobie wybaczyć. W wieku 50 lat przeszedł kryzys egzystencjalny i rozpoczął podróż w poszukiwaniu sensu życia. Codziennie czytał Ewangelię, prowadził ascetyczny tryb życia i tworzył własną koncepcję szczęścia. Czym było szczęście dla Tołstoja? W tym opracowaniu staram się omówić koncepcję szczęścia Tołstoja wypływającą z analizy *Spowiedzi* w kontekście *Kazania na górze*.

#### **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:**

Tołstoj, literatura, szczęście, *Spowiedź*, *Kazanie na górze*

## INTRODUCTION

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A quiet secluded life in the country, with the possibility of being useful to people to whom it is easy to do good, and who are not accustomed to have it done to them; then work which one hopes may be of some use; then rest, nature, books, music, love for one's neighbor — such is my idea of happiness.

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There are many different definitions of happiness. According to Ferguson (2002) happiness is a state of emotional and mental wellbeing and it may involve positive and pleasant emotions like extreme joy and contentment. There are also many different approaches towards happiness such as religious, biological, philosophical, economic and psychological. Twentieth March is the international happiness day declared by the United Nations in its effort to prove that happiness is more than just simple emotion like joy. Many see happiness in terms of the quality of life and/or health. Happiness is a complex term and it means something different to different people.<sup>1</sup> However, according to some researchers different religion traditions and their structures contribute to happiness.<sup>2</sup>

Religious traditions such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism can make a person happier because of the socialization and support that she/he receives and that, in turn, leads to the involvement in the practice of religious life.<sup>3</sup> Religion has an impact on the positive attitude of the individual and encourages practicing religious activities. It is well known that psychological factors have an impact on happiness, and they, in turn, help individuals deal with stress effectively.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> B Brülde, *Happiness, Morality, and Politics*, Journal Of Happiness Studies, 13(2) 2010, p. 57.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 123.

<sup>3</sup> G Lafitte, B Ribush, *Happiness in a material world*, Lothian Books, Port Melbourne 2002, p. 32.

<sup>4</sup> W Ferguson, *Happiness*, Canongate, Edinburgh 2002, p. 62.

Lagatum Prosperity Index has had repeated research findings that confirm that there is a positive link between wellbeing, religious beliefs and religious affiliations; people who confess that God plays an important role in their lives are on average more satisfied and content with their lives than secular individuals. This is despite their amount of income or age; the personality of these people seems to play an important role in their happiness.<sup>5</sup> This index affirms the fact that religious people tend to be happier than those without any religious affiliations.

On the other hand, it has been argued that links between religious beliefs and religion are usually weak; relying on scripture might not be enough to sustain the feeling of wellbeing.<sup>6</sup> This implies that there are many religious beliefs that influence our happiness or, on the other hand, religious beliefs can add to our suffering. In addition, in numerous peer-reviewed articles we can find generalization that there is a strong relationship between religious beliefs and commitment to them with elevated signs of happiness, good self-esteem and perceived sense of wellbeing.<sup>7</sup>

Different religions have different beliefs about happiness. For instance, in Buddhist tradition, happiness can only be achieved by avoiding all forms of human desires.<sup>8</sup> Buddhism believes that everyone deserve happiness and people should be compassionate and loving towards each other. In Judaism, for example, happiness is considered vital in serving God. The Bible states that people should be joyful and happy when serving Him. This belief gives the Jewish people motivation to be happier in their daily activities and when serving God; this helps them to manage depression and unhappy moods more effectively. In many traditions of Christianity, the main reason and goal of existence is happiness; it is believed that God's plan for humanity is for people to be happy<sup>9</sup>; however, the ultimate happiness is not to be found in this world but rather the next life.<sup>10</sup> When one thinks about the goodness of God, he or she may experience a beautiful and rich feeling of wellbeing.

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<sup>5</sup> R Ridington, J Ridington, *Where Happiness Dwells*, UBC Press, Vancouver 2013, p. 90.

<sup>6</sup> K Sharpe, *The pursuit of Happiness: Evolutionary Origins, Psychological Research, and Implications for Implicit Religion*, *Implicit Religion*, 8(2) 2007, p. 53.

<sup>7</sup> K Sharpe, *The pursuit of Happiness: Evolutionary Origins, Psychological Research, and Implications for Implicit Religion*, *Implicit Religion*, 8(2) 2007, p. 59.

<sup>8</sup> W Ferguson, *Happiness*, Canongate, Edinburgh 2002, p. 54.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 123.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 145.

It appears that religion tends to fulfill most of people's needs<sup>11</sup>. Happiness has a lot to do with the personality of an individuals and events that happen in their life. While happiness has an effect on the quality of life that one lives, optimistic people usually strive to achieve a high level of happiness. It can also be argued that religious beliefs are very important in determining the level of happiness that a person can achieve.<sup>12</sup> Despite the fact the people have the choice not to have any religious affiliations, it is important to understand the possible negative implications of not having any religious affiliations. Though happiness can be viewed in different contexts, people from different religious traditions seem to experience happiness on a larger scale.

### **TOLSTOY AND HAPPINESS**

Tolstoy path to the discovery of the meaning in life and happiness was not a smooth one. He was an aristocrat brought up in the dogmatic faith of Russian Orthodox Church. However, as a young boy, he stopped going to confession and started questioning sacraments imposed by Church. As a young man he travelled to fight in Caucasus with his brother Dimitri who was an official of the Russian army.<sup>13</sup> He took part in the battles close to the Starogladkovskaya border which divided the Cossack territory from the Muslim villages in the Caucasus mountains, and later fought in the Crimean war between 1854–55, which ended in Russia's defeat. In his book *Confession* Tolstoy explained how he thought of those years in the military with horror because he had killed so many men in the war. He thought about his lies, the robberies, the waste of his fortune, but remembered that his friends had praised him and had considered him to be a moral man. Yet he was aware that such life did not offer him any meaning. He lost belief in the dogmas of his Church but he was searching for spiritual unity with God. In his *Diaries*, written in Caucasus on the 11<sup>th</sup> June 1851, Tolstoy revealed that he had prayed ardently and that it had offered him inner stillness.

The writer indicated that the idea of going to Caucasus probably came to him from above; it was the hand of God which drove him to fulfil his purpose. In his *Diary* of the 8<sup>th</sup> July 1853 Tolstoy wrote:

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 112.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 25.

I cannot prove the existence of God. I cannot find any evidence and I can't find this concept to be necessary. It is easier to understand the existence of the entire world in its perfect order than the one who made it. The desire of the body and of man's soul constitutes the only way that man has to understand the mystery of life. When the desire of the soul contrasts with the desire of the body, it is the soul which wins, because it is immortal and that which reaches happiness. I do not understand the need for the existence of God, but I believe in Him and I ask Him to help me to understand it.<sup>14</sup>

After Tolstoy's religious crisis at the age of 50, his purpose in life was to spread the word of God, fight for social and religious justice in Russia and to educate the poor.<sup>15</sup> Serving other people brought him happiness.

Tolstoy distanced himself from Russian Orthodox Church because of two reasons; the Orthodox Church denied the "correct" understanding of the faith of other Christian religions. For Tolstoy, what mattered was man and love for his neighbour. The second reason lay in the position of the Church regarding war. "How could the Russians kill their enemies in war in the name of the faith which the Church professed?" Tolstoy kept asking without finding any logical answer.<sup>16</sup>

Tolstoy rejected the Church's approval of killing enemies during war. This rejection of the Church as an institution probably had deeper roots. The search for the truth, the passionate temperament of Tolstoy no longer needed external rules for his own happiness as spiritual wellbeing. For Tolstoy, religion did not reside in the preparation of man for a future life, but should be strength for the present life.

Tolstoy understood that "the truth" is found in tradition, in the Gospels. His profession of faith was much simpler than that of the Church and more accessible to the poor. All the teaching of the Church seemed superficial to him. He could, however, accept the superficial, despite being incomprehensible to him if the spiritual world that the Church offered did not oppose true love towards neighbours. For Tolstoy, religion and faith are not so separated from intellectual life; faith, life, understanding of the world, and performance in this world should all form an interior unity in man.

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<sup>14</sup> L N Tolstoy, *Diary*, volume 58, p. 67.

<sup>15</sup> L N Tolstoy, *Confession*, volume 10, p. 34.

<sup>16</sup> L N Tolstoy, *Diary*, volume 58, p. 78.

For four years (1879–1883) Tolstoy dedicated himself to the enormous work of translating thousands of pages of the Greek Gospels to Russian with notes and critical commentaries of the Russian theologians in order to demonstrate that his translation was more correct and detailed than other translations. The usefulness of this enormous work was contained within itself. Tolstoy soon realised that it was not valuable to either intellectuals or to the simple people. Furthermore, such a detailed translation of the Gospels, which would change the meaning of the other interpretations, was not permitted in Russia at that time. When he became aware of the difficulties, Tolstoy wrote *The Gospel in Brief* the work which contained the very interpretation of the Gospels made by the writer. This was what led him to the elaboration of his own commandments, which were based entirely on the teaching of Christ in the New Testament.<sup>17</sup>

Tolstoy observed that Christ himself never wrote any book and that he never addressed the educated people. Only after his death did anyone begin to write what was known of him. As the four Gospels are the work of thousands of human minds. Churches added false interpretations, and distorted and contradictory explanations.<sup>18</sup> For Tolstoy, the essence of Christianity resides in the total fulfilment of five fundamental ideas taken from the New Testament, Thou shalt not resist evil.

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## Thou shalt not resist evil.

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According to Matthew 5:38–42 and Luke 6:29–30 the fourth commandment states:

You have heard that it was said, '*An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.*' But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have *your* cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> L N Tolstoy, *Diary*, volume 57, p. 98.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 101.

<sup>19</sup> L N Tolstoy, *Kingdom of God*, volume 23, p. 253.

The translation of the Greek words into English “thou shalt not oppose evil”, often used in the sense of “thou shalt not resist the actions of the evil one” were translated by Tolstoy as “thou shall not fight against evil” (ne boris so zlom), but he names the chapter relating to this material “thou shall not oppose evil” (nie protivsia zlu zlom).<sup>20</sup>

In Tolstoy’s interpretation, the Greek Orthodox priests who interpreted this passage placed certain restrictions on the understanding of these words of Christ. According to them, the commandment did not prohibit private or public means to reduce evil, but contained the possibility to harm others. Tolstoy’s version stated:

Christ advises that we do not act returning evil for evil that is very simple; fire does not kill fire, and evil does not kill evil. Only kindness, upon finding evil, not infected by it, may conquer evil.<sup>21</sup>

Tolstoy added that loving your enemies forms the basis of Christianity. He knew this from childhood, but he did not correctly understand these simple words:

Never do anything against the law of love. They taught me from childhood that Christ was God, and that his doctrine is divine. But at the same time they taught me to respect the sacred institutions which protected me from violence and evil. They taught me that I should resist evil, they taught me to punish others and to judge them. According to these principles, everything around me, my personal security, my family, and my property depended on the law of Christ [a tooth for a tooth].<sup>22</sup>

In terms of this commandment, Tolstoy said that, in justice tribunals, in all forms of discipline and order, the law of Christ is ignored because “evil with evil” is resisted. For Tolstoy, all manner of punishment constitutes evil and, for this reason, all forms of organised justice constitute an evil.<sup>23</sup>

There is one more commandment that Tolstoy considers essential to ensure that the kingdom of God is fulfilled in this world is to love the neighbours. According to Matthew 5:43–48:

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<sup>20</sup> L N Tolstoy, *Diary*, volume 58, p. 78.

<sup>21</sup> L N Tolstoy, *Kingdom of God*, volume 23, p. 65.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 189.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 378.

You have heard that it was said, '*You shall love your neighbour* and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the Gentiles do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.<sup>24</sup>

Tolstoy explained that Jesus Christ had said words which were not found in the Mosaic Law. He consulted the concordances of the Greek Gospels searching for the words "enemy" and "neighbour". He was convinced that when the word "neighbour" was used in Hebrew, the meaning given was of citizen of the same town, or another Jew. Because of this, he arrived at the conclusion that Christ wanted to differentiate between the citizens of one town and the fellow countrymen and foreigners. In the Gospels, the word "enemy" is never used in the sense of a personal enemy, but rather in that of an enemy of the country. Tolstoy explained that in the Mosaic Law the Jews were asked not to treat the enemies of their land badly. The writer thought that he had already solved the problem of the incorrect use of these two words, interpreting the word "enemy" in the sense of an enemy of the nation and not a personal enemy.

Tolstoy often affirmed that there are hundreds of religions in the world, and thousands of superstitions; all have the same basis despite having different forms and expressions.<sup>25</sup> All these religions relate to the conscience of these truths. The religions have different exterior forms but they have the same essence; the power of God through love makes us strong.

Some years later he amplified this affirmation, explaining that he did not want to be a Christian, and that he did not want people to be Buddhist, Confucian, Taoist, or Muslim. According to the writer, we all had to find our own faith, common to us all, renounce ourselves, and dedicate ourselves fully to the community<sup>26</sup>. He came to believe that this is the highest level of 'happiness' in all its forms and meanings.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 454.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 323.

<sup>26</sup> L N Tolstoy, *Diary*, volume 58, p. 67.



## CONCLUSION

Tolstoy started teaching a more universal and more inclusive understanding of religions after his religious conversion. He was against labeling religions and people and claimed that most religious traditions had a monopoly on Truth. The question that Tolstoy kept asking was: Do people become enemies because they change their religion? Is the God of the Mohammedan tradition different from the God of the Hindu? Religions are different roads leading to the same goal. Does it matter that we take different roads if they all lead us to the same point? Does it matter that we take different roads if we reach the same goal? According to Tolstoy all the religions are equal in the sense they are true to the people who profess them. They are leading their believers towards spiritual progress of humanity.

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### **Biogram**

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