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LEO TOLSTOY'S CRITIQUE OF CHURCH CHRISTIANITY

According to Tolstoy, what Christ actually proposes is an alternative vision of life. Its central element is looking upon life as something given to us: originally by everyone and everything that lived before us, and ultimately by the mysterious origin of life, the first cause of everything. Seen from such a perspective, a human life is not something isolated or belonging to a particular subject; rather, it should be seen as a moment in the life of the entire universe, and we are supposed to work for the good of this whole without following our individual fancies.

For the last thirty years of his long life, Leo Tolstoy was a philosopher rather than a fiction writer. He wrote extensively on topics which from the academic point of view may be subsumed to such diverse philosophical disciplines as anthropology, ethics, philosophy of religion, aesthetics, social and political philosophy, cultural critique, and metaphysics. However, this enormous bulk of work has so far received little attention among the so-called professional philosophers, most likely because Tolstoy himself was no professional philosopher. While there has been a notable general academic interest in his work,¹ some of its most interesting philosophical aspects have not received the attention they deserve. This applies especially to Tolstoy's philosophy of religion and, more precisely, to his original conception of religion on the one hand and his critique of Christianity on the other, which so far have not been adequately investigated with analytical tools.²

The aim of this paper is to reconstruct and analyze the latter, namely, Tolstoy's critique of Christianity, or, more precisely, his critique of "Church

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¹ See Alexandre Christoyannopoulos, "Leo Tolstoy's Anticlericalism in Its Context and Beyond: A Case against Churches and Clerics, Religious and Secular," *Religions* 7, no. 5 (2016): 1.

² The only author who paid adequate attention to Tolstoy's theory of religion was Nicolas Weisbein, but even he failed to notice the evolution of Tolstoy's theory (which is ironic, given the title of Weisbein's book). See Nicolas Weisbein, *L'évolution religieuse de Tolstoi* (Paris: Librairie des Cinq Continents, 1960), 430–45. Among the best recent commentaries on Tolstoy's critique of Christianity are Christoyannopoulos' works, in particular his *Leo Tolstoy's Anticlericalism in Its Context and Beyond*.

Christianity.”³ In his philosophical works, Tolstoy proposes a conception of what he considers the true, real Christianity, and, equipped with this theory, launches an attack on almost everything considered as a manifestation of Christianity in our world and, as such, shaped and determined by the institutional Church. Thus, I begin with a short presentation of Tolstoy's conception of the real, true Christianity and then proceed to an analysis of the specific criticisms that Tolstoy makes. I conclude with some remarks on the nature and scope of Tolstoy's critique.

One more remark concerning the title of the present paper. Tolstoy uses the phrase “Church Christianity” extremely rarely. For example, it is absent from *What I Believe*,⁴ and in *The Kingdom of God is Within You* it occurs only once, or, at best, twice, if we assume that the phrase “Church Christians”⁵ as its derivative can also count. However, had Tolstoy not used the phrase in question at all, it would still be the best term to name the object of his critique. The Christianity that exists in the actual world and which Tolstoy addresses is, at least in his opinion, wholly or almost wholly shaped and controlled by the institution called the Church. Such an approach is visible in almost all Tolstoy's religious writings, perhaps most notably in chapter three of *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, which almost entirely focuses on describing how alien and contrary to true Christianity the idea of the Church and its implementations in history have been.⁶ As he puts it in the words opening the book: “In affirming my belief in Christ's teaching, I could not help explaining why I do not believe, and consider as mistaken, the Church's doctrine, which is usually called Christianity.”⁷ Hence, in the considerations that will follow, I will be using the term “Church Christianity” to identify the object of Tolstoy's critique.

TRUE CHRISTIANITY

BELIEF IN THE TEACHING OF CHRIST AND FOLLOWING IT IN PRACTICE

Tolstoy's interest in the true nature of Christianity began with his middle-age existential crisis, which he started to experience in the late 1870s. Feeling that life was absolutely meaningless, because no matter what one did or how successful one was, everything was to be destroyed by an inevitable death, Tolstoy, turned towards the religion of his childhood, hoping that Christianity

³ See Leo Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God Is Within You: Christianity Not as a Mystic Religion but as a New Theory of Life*, trans. Constance Garnett (n.p.: Watchmaker Publishing, 1951), 29.

⁴ See Leo Tolstoy, *What I Believe*, trans. Constatine Popoff (London: Elliot Stock, 1885).

⁵ Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, 47.

⁶ See *ibidem*, 33–51.

⁷ *Ibidem*, 5.

would provide a solution to the problem of life. Yet, from the moment of his conversion, he felt that there was something wrong about the Christianity the Church was teaching, and it took him some time to make it clear what exactly the problem was.⁸ The turning point in his spiritual pursuit was his realization of the apparent inconsistency between the actual teachings of Christ (worshipped by the Church) as they were described in the Bible, and what the Church was teaching as binding to the Christians. The inconsistency in question could mean either of the two things: (1) Christ, and consequently the Church that follows him, proposes an obscure, incoherent and thus useless doctrine; (2) the actual teaching of Christ is perfectly clear, rational, and useful, and it is the Church that for some reason made it so unclear.⁹

Tolstoy's scrutiny of the problem led him to the conclusion that the latter was the case. He based his insights on the assumption that Christ's teaching embraced two aspects, which he called "metaphysical" and "ethical," respectively.¹⁰ First of all, in Tolstoy's opinion, Christ had brought in his teaching a new understanding ("doctrine", "conception" or sometimes even "theory") of life. According to that doctrine, as Tolstoy conceived of it, all humans were inclined to treat their lives as individual, separated from others as well as from the world in general and consider their lives as something they could control. Consequently, pursuing what they believed would bring them good and help them achieve happiness.¹¹ However, according to Tolstoy, Christ deemed such a conception as badly wrong: in numerous parables—he stressed—Christ had tried to show his followers that no matter how powerful they were and how much effort they put in, they would not be able to control their lives, and therefore they were unable to secure their happiness. Besides, added Tolstoy, every individual life was terminated by inevitable death, taking from us everything we had achieved in life. An individual life in which one can find happiness is therefore a painful illusion, as Tolstoy puts it: the described understanding

⁸ See Leo Tolstoy, "A Confession," trans. Jane Kentish, in Leo Tolstoy, *"A Confession" and Other Religious Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 17–80. For more information on Tolstoy's spiritual evolution and his existential crisis, see especially Inessa Medzhbovskaia, *Tolstoy and the Religious Culture of His Time: A Biography of a Long Conversion; 1845-1887* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2008).

⁹ See Tolstoy, *What I Believe*, 4–13.

¹⁰ See *ibidem*, 202–3. Throughout the text I will keep putting these two descriptions in inverted commas, since, in my opinion, they are not the best terms to name the things that Tolstoy speaks about. This is true in particular about the former, since, as we shall see, the "metaphysical" part of Christ's doctrine, according to Tolstoy, consists in stating a most trivial fact, however neglected it might appear, accompanied by the suggestion of a certain metaphor describing the facts of life in general. While it might be possible this is all that metaphysics actually does, it does not correspond to the way in which the term "metaphysics" is normally used—hence my decision.

¹¹ See *ibidem*, 126.

of life rests on a false presumption and results in a painful striving ultimately destroyed by death. Life, if lived along such lines, is indeed devoid of any meaning.¹²

However, according to Tolstoy, what Christ actually proposes is an alternative vision of life. Its central element is looking upon life, both our individual lives and life in general, upon the existence of everything that makes up the world, as something which has been given to us: originally by everyone and everything that lived before us, and ultimately by the mysterious origin of life, the first cause of everything. Seen from such a perspective, a human life is not something isolated or belonging to a particular subject; rather, it should be seen as a moment in the life of the entire universe, and we are supposed to work for the good of this whole without following our individual fancies. The meaning of life lies precisely in this renouncing of our will, of our idea for our life, in finding our place in this great order of things and working for the good of others. Such a meaning of life is not destroyed by the death of an individual, because the life of the universe, of which we are just a moment, lasts forever.¹³

This is what Tolstoy calls the “metaphysical” part of the teaching of Jesus. The crucial element of its second aspect, the “ethical,” is, according to Tolstoy, what Christ says in the Sermon on the Mount, and, more precisely, the precepts that Christ gives there, which Tolstoy calls the “five commandments of Christ.”¹⁴ In *What I Believe* they are precisely called “commandments,” later, though, for instance in *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, they are rather presented as minimal standards or conditions of social life everyone who wants to become a follower of Christ has to meet.¹⁵ Whatever the exact status of these standards, they can be summarized as follows: (1) Christ forbids any negative or aggressive emotions towards others; he enjoins his disciples never to treat their anger as justified. In opposition to the Old Law, which only forbade killing neighbors, Christ says that any aggressive feeling towards another human being is always bad and thus to be avoided. (2) Christ teaches that the union between a man and a woman is sacred and not to be destroyed by human will. In contrast to the Old Law, which allowed for divorce, Christ, in Tolstoy's interpretation, forbids it entirely. (3) Christ teaches not to resist evil with violence. In contrast to the Old Law, which enjoined revenge, Christ says that his followers should not oppose evil with evil, which is definitely a wrong way to eradicate evil from the world. (4) Christ forbids making oaths, that is promising absolute, unconditional obedience to anyone. (5) And finally, Christ

¹² See *ibidem*, 127–33.

¹³ See *ibidem*, 133–35.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, 67, 104.

¹⁵ See Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, 58–61.

commands his followers to make no difference between their compatriots and those coming from other, even hostile nations: his disciples are enjoined to treat everyone uniformly, as children of one God.¹⁶

On a more general level, true Christianity is, according to Tolstoy, a special instance of what he calls, in his earlier writings, divine religions¹⁷ and true religions¹⁸ in his later ones. As has already been mentioned, Tolstoy not only expounds his own interpretation of Christianity, but also proposes a more comprehensive philosophy of religion, its crucial part being precisely the conception of what religion is and what its main manifestations are. According to an early version of this conception, suggested in *What I Believe* and fully expressed in Tolstoy's writings from the early 1890s, religion is one's attitude towards one's life and the world in general. Such an attitude is basically practical, i.e., it marks the way in which an individual approaches himself, or herself, and external reality in everyday life; thus, everyone necessarily has such an attitude, whether they are aware of it or not. If expressed in language, it forms what Tolstoy calls the "theory"¹⁹ or "doctrine"²⁰ of life. In his opinion, there can be only three such attitudes, or doctrines: individualistic, collective, and divine. Within the first, individualistic one, an individual lives for the satisfaction of his or her individual desires and treats everything around as either a means or an obstacle to his or her individual happiness. In the second, collectivist mode, an individual considers himself or herself as a member of a social group: a family, a clan, a tribe, a nation etc., and lives for the sake of the good of that bigger, social entity, treating everything else—again, as was the case in the individualistic approach—as either a means or an obstacle to happiness, this time, however, communal rather than individual. And thirdly, there is also divine religion: it is an attitude towards life in which an individual treats himself or herself as an element of the entire universe and tries to work for the good of that infinite whole.

According to Tolstoy, every major religious tradition, whether Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism or Islam, begins with, or has at its core, some version of what he calls divine religion: in every such tradition you can find the idea of an individual as a moment in the life of the whole Universe, recognizing his

¹⁶ See Tolstoy, *What I Believe*, 67–106.

¹⁷ See Leo Tolstoy, "Religion and Morality," trans. Jane Kentish, in Tolstoy, *"A Confession" and Other Religious Writings*, 129–50, and Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, 52–57 (chapter four).

¹⁸ See Leo Tolstoy, "What Is Religion and of What Does Its Essence Consist?" trans. Jane Kentish, in Tolstoy, *"A Confession" and Other Religious Writings*, 81–128. For a discussion of the evolution of Tolstoy's conception of religion, see Maksymilian Roszyk, "Problem jedności Tołstojowskiej koncepcji religii," *Roczniki Filozoficzne* 65, no. 4 (2017): 177–99.

¹⁹ Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, 1.

²⁰ Tolstoy, *What I Believe*, 57, 107, 156.

or her indebtedness to it and trying to live so as to harmonize his or her life with the life of this infinite whole. Other historical religions fall under one of the two remaining categories, so none of them is divine; rather, they are either individualistic or collective. The religions of primitive tribes are individualistic, because people there live for their individual good, understood as the satisfaction of their personal desires, and they imagine gods as powers which may be helpful in securing those individual goods. The religions of the ancients Greeks, Romans or Jews are, in turn, exemplifications of the collectivist attitude, since individuals there think about themselves as living for the good of the nation to which they belong, and the gods or God they worship are considered to have a special relation to the respective nation and its well-being.²¹

Tolstoy is convinced that the teachings of Christ are the foundation of a new religion which breaks with traditional Judaism and its collectivism, proposing a religion that is a divine. Christ openly rejects the collectivist attitude to life, characteristic of the Judaist tradition, and abolishes the most damaging practical prescriptions of the Mosaic law: violence, revenge, hatred to other nations, judgements and oath-making, instead proposing a life which obeys the will of God, is in harmony with the world, and shows the attitude of love towards all other people.²²

TOLSTOY'S CRITICISMS OF CHURCH CHRISTIANITY

As has been shown, Tolstoy offers a clear conception of what he considers to be true or genuine Christianity. Firstly, let us note that his idea is by no means based on what is traditionally and usually called "Christianity." Rather, it rests on the assumption that Christ, universally acknowledged as the founder of Christianity, had a clear message, which he presented in his teaching and which is more or less adequately depicted in the Gospels: it is *this teaching* that defines what Christianity really is. Now, while this teaching may at first seem to be obscure, trivial or irrelevant, on a closer examination, it turns out to be perfectly clear, rational and touching upon absolutely fundamental matters in life. In other words, true, genuine Christianity may be also called original: it existed in the beginning as the founder, Christ himself, projected it. Secondly, Tolstoy does not stop at merely expounding this conception, but also provides us with its more general, philosophical interpretation, namely, he scrutinizes what kind of religion true Christianity is. His interpretation springs from his theory of religion already discussed here, and he holds that true Christianity

²¹ See Tolstoy, "Religion and Morality," 134–36.

²² See Tolstoy, *What I Believe*, 156–63; Tolstoy, "Religion and Morality," 143–44.

is among “divine” religions, since it enjoins an individual to renounce both individualistic and collectivist ideas of life and exhorts an individual to see himself or herself as a part of life of the Universe as a whole. Seen in this way, true Christianity is a new model of life, “a new theory of life,” as Tolstoy himself put it in the subtitle of *The Kingdom of God is Within You*.

His own conception of genuine Christianity in one way or another enables Tolstoy to look critically on what is called Christianity in the actual world around him. As one can easily guess, having compared the paradigm with its interpretations in history, Tolstoy is very critical of the latter. The difference is so huge that he does not hesitate to call the universally accepted Christianity “pseudo-Christianity,”²³ so distant it is from the teaching of Christ. Thus it is worthwhile discussing his more specific objections.

INTRODUCING A METAPHYSICAL DOCTRINE ALIEN
TO CHRIST AND HIS THOUGHT IN PLACE OF THE ACTUAL TEACHING
OF CHRIST (OBJECTION 1)

As has already been noted, Tolstoy believed that the teaching of Christ has two aspects: the “metaphysical” one, which offers an understanding of life, and the “ethical” one, which gives clear directions of how to act in the most important matters of everyday life, specifically the practical ones. The so called “metaphysical” aspect is in turn basically focused on the assertion that a human being is mortal, as well as on the encouragement to think about one’s life as a part of a whole, that is entire Universe. The Church, according to Tolstoy, presents as something central and absolutely fundamental to Christianity a “metaphysically cabalistic theory,”²⁴ which holds that Christ is actually a God, the second person of the Holy Trinity, that he was incarnated to save mankind from this earthly life and secure for humans an eternal bliss in heaven.²⁵ Tolstoy claims that all these tenets are alien to Christ’s teaching: while reading the Gospels, we can see that Jesus claimed himself to be neither God nor to be the second person of the Trinity, or that his mission was to save people from this life and offer them eternal life in heaven; the excerpts that are usually cited to support such theses are sparse, obscure, and usually do not give anything close to a convincing credit to them, whereas the ones that present the real teaching of Christ are numerous and clear, leaving no doubt that he was saying precisely what he meant to say.

²³ See Tolstoy, *What I Believe*, 204–5.

²⁴ Ibidem, 204.

²⁵ See ibidem, 109–12.

THE CHURCH DOCTRINE IS AT LEAST PARTLY FALSE,
PRIMITIVE AND CHRIST OPENLY REJECTS
AT LEAST ITS CRUCIAL PART (OBJECTION 2)

Tolstoy emphasizes that the crucial element of the Church doctrine is its conception of life. According to this conception the only life that we know, namely, the life we are living here and now, is spoilt, fallen, and ultimately unreal (that is what the doctrine of fall says), but there is another life, eternal and blissful, which awaits us after death, and that is the only real life (that is what the doctrine of individual immortality says).²⁶ Tolstoy holds that this conception is first of all false, since we know nothing about the existence of eternal life, and there are no reasons to think that it exists, except for our wishful thinking.²⁷

Secondly, this conception is primitive, i.e., the mode of thinking it demonstrates is characteristic of a primitive, pre-civilization mind.²⁸ The belief in individual immortality rests on the assumption that what really counts in life is my individual existence and fulfilling my personal desires. This assumption is, as we have seen, central to what Tolstoy calls "individualistic" religions, and an individualistic religion is something specific to primitive peoples that have not entered yet the stage of civilization; it is rejected once people move to civilization, which could be seen, for instance, in the cases of ancient Rome or Greece. What is more, the belief in the Fall and in individual immortality is not only alien to Christ, but it is also openly rejected by him. Christ's parables and maxims either openly criticize and reject such a mode of thinking, or at least they only make sense provided he rejected them. Tolstoy stresses that, in his numerous parables, such as those about the Galileans killed by Pilate, or those killed by the collapsing tower, about predicting the weather, making projects for the future (building a house or going to war), about a man who wanted to build new barns, or about servants awaiting their master, Jesus confirms the obvious fact that all humans die and nothing, even the greatest power, cannot save them from death.²⁹ Moreover, in the parables about the vinedresser and about the talents, Christ shows the reason why humans forget about the inevitability of death is that they tend to think about their individual lives as something they have a right to and something that belongs to them. This is a mistake, and Christ tries to make his listeners aware that the only life that is not destroyed by the death is a life involving a close relation with God, a life

²⁶ See *ibidem*, 110–14.

²⁷ See *ibidem*, 111.

²⁸ See *ibidem*, 141.

²⁹ See *ibidem*, 127–31.

in which one renounces one's own ideas for life and instead tries to work for this great whole of which one is a part.³⁰

Finally, Tolstoy stresses that Christ did not believe in any kind of individual immortality: neither in resurrection, nor in the immortality of the soul. That he did not believe in resurrection is evident, for instance, in the way in which he responded to the Sadducees; besides, he never spoke about his own alleged resurrection; finally, he neither believed in nor proclaimed the doctrine of the immortal soul, which, as Tolstoy stresses, was Greek in origin and alien not just to Jesus, but to the Jews of that time in general.³¹

FALSIFICATION OF CHRIST'S TEACHING BY THE CHURCH (OBJECTION 3)

Having adhered to a doctrine of life that Christ rejected, the Church could not but falsify his actual teaching. This can be seen, firstly, in its misinterpretation of the metaphorical concepts of the Son of God, the Son of Man, or the Kingdom of God: according to the doctrine of the Church, the "Son of God" is interpreted as a title which applies to Christ only, and not to others, the "Son of Man" is understood, ostensibly, against its sense, as meaning the "Son of God,"³² and the Kingdom of God is relegated to an indefinite future, or even another reality. Secondly, the crucial ethical teaching of Christ, i.e., the five commandments, are first deformed so that they become devoid of any meaning, and then anyway presented as something optional, very nice and exalted, but impractical.³³

PRACTICAL DENIAL OF CHRIST'S TEACHING BY THE CHURCH (OBJECTION 4)

The Church openly denies Christ's teachings, both the "metaphysical" and the "ethical" ones, enjoining a pagan way of life, which is called "Christian" only by the Church's arbitrary proclamation. Firstly, the Church adheres to a pagan, usually individualistic or at best collectivist doctrine of life, thus making Christianity one of the lower religions. Secondly, and in consequence, it allows for or even makes obligatory all the attitudes and actions Christ has

³⁰ See *ibidem*, 132–38.

³¹ See *ibidem*, 138–48.

³² See *ibidem*, 118.

³³ See *ibidem*, 48–106 (chapters five and six). For a broader treatment of the falsification of Christ's teaching by the Church, see Christoyannopoulos, "Leo Tolstoy's Anticlericalism in Its Context and Beyond," 7–8.

forbidden, among them hatred, killing enemies and criminals, divorce, passing judgments or oath-making.³⁴

REDUCTION OF CHRISTIANITY TO THEORETICAL BELIEFS, RITUALS,
AND WORDS DEVOID OF ANY PRACTICAL CONSEQUENCES (OBJECTION 5)

All religions in general and true Christianity in particular are what Tolstoy calls the “doctrines of life,” i.e., they not only describe or project certain facts, but also prescribe various actions that change the lives of individuals. In the case of “Church Christianity,” however, all these operations result in a reduction of being a Christian to having a set of purely theoretical views, mostly about things that cannot be verified, with no impact on life whatsoever: Tolstoy emphasizes that even participation in rituals is, after all, treated in the Church as something optional: the only thing that an individual is expected to do is to believe in the dogmas, i.e., he or she is expected to believe, change nothing in his or her habits and live as he or she pleases.³⁵

ESTABLISHING THE VERY IDEA OF “THE CHURCH” (OBJECTION 6)

One more thing can be added to the above which not even strictly a criticism, but an explanation of the mechanisms which make the phenomena listed above possible. What I mean is the “mechanism” which consists first in inventing the concept of the Church and then in creating an institution supposed to correspond to such a concept. Tolstoy believes that all divine religions can be corrupted (and they have, to some extent, always been corrupted in history) and he describes the processes behind their corruption. These processes involve, firstly, the establishment of a certain group of people (i.e., the priests) who usurp for themselves an exclusive right to mediate between the faithful and the Divine; secondly, the claim that there are events, called miracles, which are evidence of the truths the mediators ascertain; and thirdly, the claim that there are sacred communications, either expressed in a verbal form or written down in sacred books, which convey the eternal and unchangeable will of the Divine. Within “Church Christianity,” however, the situation is even more complicated, since, as Tolstoy claims, Christ and his early followers were aware of all those dangers and even made warnings to prevent them. In consequence, those who were in the process of corrupting Christ’s true religion needed to “invent” what

³⁴ See Tolstoy, *What I Believe*, 195–222 (chapter eleven).

³⁵ See *ibidem*, 37–42.

they called the Church, i.e., they proclaimed that there was a group of people infallible in their interpretations of the sacred texts. Once that institution was established, every deformation, falsification and denial of Christ's teaching became possible, even though the Gospels are clear on any given matter. Yet, it is believed that only "the Church" knows what a given message means.³⁶

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Let us note first that Tolstoy's critique of Christianity is mostly an internal one. Unlike its external critics, such as Ludwig Feuerbach or Friedrich Nietzsche, who looked upon Christianity from an external point of view, did not claim to be Christians themselves, and openly rejected Christianity in their personal lives, Tolstoy considered himself to be a Christian and thus advanced his criticism for the sake of Christianity rather than against it. While there have certainly been commentators claiming that Tolstoy was no Christian at all,³⁷ even a short look at his critique of "Church Christianity" reconstructed above shows how mistaken their view is. Out of the six criticisms specified, four are evidently made by a Christian, i.e., they rest on the assumptions shared by Christians only. The objections which claim that the problem with "Church Christianity" is that it introduces teachings that are alien to those of Christ and openly rejected by him, as well as the one that the Church falsifies Christ's teaching and denies it, rest on the assumption that Christ himself wields authority and that his teaching is endowed with authority, which is obviously a Christian assumption.

However—and that is the second observation—Tolstoy does not limit himself to addressing the Christian discourse as a Christian, but also strives to provide critical arguments which are powerful regardless of one's religious presumptions. As argued above, his philosophy of religion is not just a philosophical reflection on Christianity, but also—or even principally—an intellectual effort to provide a general theory of religion. What is characteristic about this theory is that it treats religion not as a theory, but rather as a practice. In contrast to the standard Western way of thinking about religion, Tolstoy does not

³⁶ See Tolstoy, "What is Religion," 92–96.

³⁷ See, e.g., Pål Kolstø, "Leo Tolstoy, a Church Critic Influenced by Orthodox Thought," in *Church, Nation and State in Russia and Ukraine*, ed. Geoffrey A. Hosking (Toronto: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 1991), 148–66, 162–63. To be fair, it needs to be made precise that Kolstø does not openly say that Tolstoy was not a Christian, but merely that he was certainly not an "Orthodox Christian" (162–63). However, his further argument leaves an open way to—if not implies—the conclusion that Tolstoy must not be considered a Christian at all, not merely a Christian in the sense of his membership in the Orthodox Church.

assume that its central part is a set of theoretical, factual beliefs that (mostly) describe certain otherworldly realities. Rather, he stresses that religion is a way of life: it is the attitude towards reality in general an individual adopts in his or her life. Such an attitude is manifested mostly by one's actions: while one can certainly express it in words, or even reflect on it, these are not indispensable, yet it is always visible in one's actions.³⁸ Indeed such a conception of religion can be seen in Tolstoy's claim that the conception of life present in the doctrine of the Church is primitive, as well as in his objection to the reduction of Christianity to a set of theoretical beliefs devoid of any practical consequences and, as such, to an idle talk as a result of which the beliefs one holds turn out insignificant in one's life. Contrary to such a conception, Tolstoy emphasizes that having beliefs can only work if one adopts the view that the heart of religion is to give humans practical directions in life. Moreover, his objection that the religion the Church espouses is a primitive one is at least partly based on the classification of religions which is part of Tolstoy's general theory.

Thirdly, Tolstoy's critique of Church Christianity, while similar to other internal critiques, for instance that put forward by Søren Kierkegaard, bears visible marks of its late-nineteenth-century origin which are apparent in its historical-critical apparatus. Tolstoy was familiar with the early works on the historical Jesus, for instance with David Strauss's *Life of Jesus*³⁹ and Ernest Renan's *The Life of Jesus*,⁴⁰ and himself tried to use elementary historical-critical tools in his reading of the Gospels. Yet, from a contemporary point of view, his approach may seem rather naïve, mostly because he evidently assumes that the Gospels are more or less (although in fact more rather than less) accurate protocols of the actual words and acts of Jesus rather than that the Gospels are more or less (although in fact more rather than less) free theological constructions of their authors, which, today, is a common knowledge. So, whenever Tolstoy wants to "excavate" the lost sense of what Jesus said, he consults critical editions of the texts of the Gospels, as well as the dictionaries, and is not at all bothered, for instance, by the fact that the Sermon on the Mount is totally missing from the Gospel according to John and almost totally missing from that according to Mark, who merely writes down minor thoughts that overlap with the Sermon's content, or that it is included in a short form only in Luke, and can be found in its full form exclusively in Matthew, which, from the vantage point

³⁸ For a broader treatment of Tolstoy's conception of religion, see Maksymilian R o s z y k, *Religia jako praktyka: Ludwiga Wittgensteina koncepcja religii w kontekście filozofii Lwa Tołstoja i Sorena Kierkegaarda* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2020), 35–45 and 54–56.

³⁹ See David F. S t r a u s s, *The Life of Jesus*, trans. George Eliot (Mifflintown, Pennsylvania: Sigler Press, 1994).

⁴⁰ See Ernest R e n a n, *The Life of Jesus*, trans. William G. Hutchinson (Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2010). See, e.g., T o l s t o y, *What I Believe*, 41, 91.

of contemporary research on the historical Jesus, makes it very problematic to consider this text as the foundation for a reconstruction of the original teaching of Jesus. Nonetheless, it is striking that if we compare Tolstoy's interpretation of what the original message of Jesus was with the newest results of modern research, it turns out that Tolstoy's general tenets coincide with those of John D. Crossan, a leading contemporary scholar in historical Jesus research. Like Tolstoy, he interprets Jesus as a specifically non-apocalyptic eschatological preacher, emphasizes the importance of non-violence in Jesus's teaching, and in general understands his authentic message as one of a new guidance for life that can result in a transformation of the social reality.⁴¹ Thus, the title of one of Tolstoy's most important books, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, could as well serve as the title of a work of Crossan's.

Finally, the question remains of the actual scope of Tolstoy's critique, i.e., whether it applies only the Christianity preached by the Russian Orthodox Church, or also to what other Christian Churches and denominations preach. Some authors have suggested that the former is the case.⁴² Such a conclusion, however, seems wrong, if we consider both Tolstoy's awareness and self-understanding, and the internal logic of his critique. As regards the first, one can find in Tolstoy's texts passages where he openly refers to the main Christian denominations,⁴³ as if to remind his readers that whenever he speaks about "the Church," he does not have in mind a particular Church, but precisely the Church in general. Moreover, he openly expounds his approach, for instance in chapter three of *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, where he writes: "The teaching of every Church, with its redemption and sacraments, excludes the teaching of Christ."⁴⁴ Besides, when unfolding his criticisms, he occasionally writes about events from the period of antiquity, for instance those that took place during the reign of emperor Constantine, the period when the Christendom was not yet divided.⁴⁵

As regards the second reason, if we inspect the content of his critique, i.e., his objections as analytically listed above, we can see that all of them apply more or less (but in fact more rather than less) to all major Christian Churches and denominations, whether the Orthodox, the Roman Catholic, the Lutheran, etc. All of them incorporate the "metaphysically cabalistic" doctrine regarding the second person of Godhead who comes to save the fallen humanity and secure

⁴¹ See John D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, New York: Harper Collins, 1991.

⁴² See, e.g., Christoyannopoulos, "Leo Tolstoy's Anticlericalism in Its Context and Beyond," 10.

⁴³ See, e.g., Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, 48.

⁴⁴ Ibidem, 47.

⁴⁵ Tolstoy, *What I Believe*, 204–5.

for it an eternal bliss as something essential and fundamental to Christianity (objection 1); all of them thus also stick to the idea of individual immortality (objection 2). In consequence, all of them also have to marginalize the actual teaching of Christ (again, objection 1), falsify it by various means (objection 3), deny it in practice (objection 4), and thus reduce Christianity to mere words and idle theoretical views (objection 5).

To conclude on a more general level, it may be noted that Tolstoy's critique of Christianity is original and hence interesting in its character. As has been demonstrated, it is mostly an internal critique, although it involves external criticisms, based on Tolstoy's general theory of religion. The originality of his approach lies in the fact that other critiques of Christianity, both earlier and later, are either only internal (such is the case with Kierkegaard's critique) or as, for instance, D'Holbach's or Feuerbach's, only external. Tolstoy in turn tries to combine both perspectives, and, moreover, he does not proceed mechanically, since his grounds for the external critique, i.e., his general theory of religion, is clearly connected with his base for the internal critique, i.e., the conception of true Christianity (although the two aspects are logically independent), which is a sign that he adopts a systematic approach rather than simply lists random objections that he for some random reason found convincing. Thus, his critique may turn out appealing to both those "inside Christianity" and "outside" it. Nonetheless, the weight of his arguments lies mostly on the internal side, so it will be most interesting and perhaps useful to those who are to some extent "inside" Christianity, but feel uneasy with its official, Church legacy.

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ABSTRACT / ABSTRAKT

Maksymilian ROSZYK, Leo Tolstoy's Critique of Church Christianity

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The aim of the paper is a reconstruction and an analysis of Leo Tolstoy's critique of what he called Church Christianity. In the opening section, Tolstoy's general conception of religion as a relationship or an attitude of an individual to the world (which forms the background for the critique) is described. Then Tolstoy's most important criticisms are discussed: (1) marginalization of the authentic teaching of Christ and establishing an alien metaphysical doctrine instead; (2) internal and external problems concerning the doctrine that replace the original one; (3) falsification of the crucial concepts Christ developed; (4) an open denial of certain fundamental teachings of Christ; (5) reducing Christianity to idle talk. The paper concludes with some remarks concerning the nature and scope of Tolstoys's critique.

Keywords: Tolstoy, Christianity, religion, critique of Christianity

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Maksymilian ROSZYK – Lwa Tołstoja Krytyka chrześcijaństwa kościelnego
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Celem tekstu jest rekonstrukcja i analiza sformułowanej przez Lwa Tołstoja krytyki chrześcijaństwa kościelnego. Na początku zarysowana zostaje ogólna koncepcja religii jako relacji czy nastawienia jednostki do świata sformułowana przez rosyjskiego myśliciela, która stanowi podstawę do przeprowadzonej przez niego krytyki. Następnie omówione są główne zarzuty, jakie Tołstoj wysuwa pod adresem chrześcijaństwa kościelnego: (1) marginalizacja autentycznego nauczania Chrystusa i zastąpienie go obcą mu metafizyczną doktryną; (2) wewnętrzne i zewnętrzne problemy z tą doktryną; (3) zafałszowanie kluczowych pojęć, jakich używa Chrystus w swym nauczaniu; (4) otwarte zanegowanie kluczowych punktów autentycznego nauczania Chrystusa; (5) redukcja chrześcijaństwa do wypowiedzania słów niemających znaczenia w praktyce. W części końcowej przedstawione są uwagi dotyczące natury i zasięgu Tołstojowskiej krytyki.

Słowa kluczowe: Tołstoj, chrześcijaństwo, religia, krytyka chrześcijaństwa

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