



The Kingdom of God Is Within You

Leo Tolstoy , Constance Garnett (Translator)

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Banned in Russia, Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* was deemed a threat to church and state. The culmination of a lifetime's thought, it espouses a commitment to Jesus's message of turning the other cheek. In a bold and original manner, Tolstoy shows his readers clearly why they must reject violence of any sort—even that sanctioned by the state or the church—and urges them to look within themselves to find the answers to questions of morality.

In 1894, one of the first English translations of this book found its way into the hands of a young Gandhi. Inspired by its message of nonresistance to evil, the Mahatma declared it a source of "independent thinking, profound morality, and truthfulness." Much of this work's emotional and moral appeal lies in its emphasis on fair treatment of the poor and working class. Its view of Christianity, not as a mystic religion but as a workable philosophy originating from the words of a remarkable teacher, extends its appeal to secular and religious readers alike.

The Kingdom of God Is Within You Details

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From Reader Review *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* for online ebook

Rob says

this is an amazing book. i'm not a religious person and i can't say i believe in god, but this book sort of made me believe in jesus. not the supernatural aspects of him, but in his philosophy. tolstoy rips into the Church and gives no quarter, saying that the clergy are no better than gangsters. his elucidation of the profound madness involved when "christians" march off to war made me jump out of my chair and say, "yes!" read this book.

Ryan says

Tolstoy's radical take on Christianity may not sound so radical at first: he insists on a rigid adherence to the specific verbal instructions of Jesus as described in the Gospels. The sermon on the mount, in particular, is afforded special emphasis as a sort of new set of commandments. This is, notably, the sermon in which Jesus instructs us to turn the other cheek and be forgiving and loving of one another. These teachings, he writes, constitute the body of Christianity- they define what it means to be a follower of Christ.

For Tolstoy, this naturally raises questions on the social & political levels. If we are to love one another universally, how can we reconcile this with state obligations that would have us go to war? What are we to do about the imprisoning, torture and killing of evildoers? Is it truly a Christian society that relies on the widespread exploitation and deprivation of lower classes? Jesus's vision is a radical one that aims to unite all peoples in love as equals- so how close are we to this, after two millennia of rule of so-called "christian nations?"

Tolstoy sees an inherent contradiction between Christ's teachings and the function of the state as a largely repressive, violent institution. His doctrine also calls into question the focus on superstition and supernatural dogma of the established churches. Nothing like the church, he argues, appears in Jesus's direct teachings, with all its earthly powers and authority.

Living at the turn of the 20th century in Russia, Tolstoy saw the writing on the walls: he repeatedly calls for reason and unity in the face of the mad building-up of war machines that lead toward inevitable massacre. He foresaw at least World War One, and makes other prescient remarks essentially about mutually assured destruction. This is the real focus of his work, to ask why as a species we seem hellbent on self-destruction and why we all willingly work together to enact the hateful, mad schemes of our imposed rulers, to the deprivation of ourselves and our neighbors. The way out of this blood-soaked labyrinth is his "Christian conception of life."

The heart of his theory concerns human motivation. He outlines a rough sort of history / anthropology moving between the pagan conception of life, through to the state conception and then to the Christian. Importantly, he identifies a link between our spiritual / metaphysical beliefs, and our behavior as a whole.

Rational self-interest, the latest holy cow of enshrined state philosophy, is in Tolstoy's argument both the mode of the state conception of life ("I will do what's best for me and my family") and the critical link in the chains that keep us fettered to mass suffering. As long as we look out for number one, we can never mount a

meaningful resistance to this maltreatment, for to step out of line as a solitary soul risks much while accomplishing little (for the self, that is.) Directing all of us to focus on ourselves rather than our collective interest is the ultimate "divide and conquer" that drives a wedge between everyone.

Tolstoy's "Christian conception of life", by contrast, places adherence to a Godly ideal above all else: the love of every fellow human. Now if this is our deepest motive, above all petty self-interest, we should have no problem suffering and even dying in order to serve this higher spiritual vision of human potential. Tolstoy means total radical non-compliance with the state, especially forced conscription, while maintaining nonviolence and accepting the punishments that the rulers of this earthly realm may dish out. Sounds an awful lot like the early Christians who were persecuted by the Romans- even Jesus himself, killed for challenging the authorities of his time.

I believe that Tolstoy is onto something very important here. Rational self-interest has been studied extensively in game theory and economics. It can be mathematically (and experimentally) shown in the "prisoner's dilemma" that it doesn't always lead to the best possible outcome- and in fact causes us to figuratively shoot ourselves in the foot. Hofstadter's notion of "hyperrationality" was one attempt to get out of this self-imposed trap; I think Tolstoy is dealing with exactly the same questions.

Altogether, this was a very interesting and powerful polemic, and I was extremely excited to finally find an author who seems to take the same understanding of Christianity as I have. Tolstoy lacks economic theory, and as a result seems to see wars as a result of the petty vanities and disagreements between our rules. Perhaps true in his time, but I am inclined to think war has always been an economic device. Nevertheless, he was a remarkably visionary author and reads as a voice of sanity crying out in the wilderness, as his era slipped inexorably toward the yawning pit of global catastrophe.

Jeske says

It's been almost a month since i finished this book, and i still think about it every day. It has greatly impressed and inspired me. I am not good at writing reviews, especially about great books, that's why i have been putting it off. But it deserves some praise from my side, since it's the best book i've read this year. I love Tolstoy's honest and raw way of writing and arguing. His vision on non-resistance to evil which is present throughout the whole book, is wonderfully radical and inspiring. He saw and clearly argued that the church got Jesus' message all wrong. I did not agree with everything. For example, he claims that believing the things of the bible that go against science is merely superstition and a way of the church leaders to gain power over people. I think there are things in life that cannot be explained by science, but whose existence we cannot deny. Not agreeing with everything, for me, is not a hindrance in learning from and being changed for the better by a book and this is a great example of that.

I particularly loved this part:

The essence of every religious teaching does not consist in the desire to express the forces of Nature symbolically, or in the fear of them, or in the demand for the miraculous, or in the external forms of its manifestation, as the men of science imagine. The essence of religion lies in the property of men prophetically to foresee and point out the path of life, over which humanity must travel, in a new definition

of the meaning of life, from which also results a new, the whole future activity of humanity.

This property of foreseeing the path on which humanity must travel is in a greater or lesser degree common to all men, but there have always, at all times, been men, in whom this quality has been manifested with particular force, and these men expressed clearly and precisely what was dimly felt by all men, and established a new comprehension of life, from which resulted an entirely new activity, for hundreds and thousands of years.

We know three such conceptions of life: two of them humanity has already outlived, and the third is the one through which we are now passing in Christianity. There are three, and only three, such conceptions, not because we have arbitrarily united all kinds of life-conceptions into these three, but because the acts of men always have for their base one of these three life-conceptions, because we cannot understand life in any other way than by one of these three means.

The three life-conceptions are these: the first?—the personal, or animal; the second?—the social, or the pagan; and the third?—the universal, or the divine.

According to the first life-conception, man's life is contained in nothing but his personality; the aim of his life is the gratification of the will of this personality. According to the second life-conception, man's life is not contained in his personality alone, but in the aggregate and sequence of personalities?—in the tribe, the family, the race, the state; the aim of life consists in the gratification of the will of this aggregate of personalities. According to the third life-conception, man's life is contained neither in his personality, nor in the aggregate and sequence of personalities, but in the beginning and source of life, in God.

These three life-conceptions serve as the foundation of all past and present religions.

The savage recognizes life only in himself, in his personal desires. The good of his life is centred in himself alone. The highest good for him is the greatest gratification of his lust. The prime mover of his life is his personal enjoyment. His religion consists in appeasing the divinity in his favor, and in the worship of imaginary personalities of gods, who live only for personal ends.

A pagan, a social man, no longer recognizes life in himself alone, but in the aggregate of personalities?—in the tribe, the family, the race, the state?—and sacrifices his personal good for these aggregates. The prime mover of his life is glory. His religion consists in the glorification of the heads of unions?—of eponyms, ancestors, kings, and in the worship of gods, the exclusive protectors of his family, his race, his nation, his state. [The unity of this life-conception is not impaired by the fact that so many various forms of life, as that of the tribe, the family, the race, the state, and even the life of humanity, according to the theoretical speculations of the positivists, are based on this social, or pagan, life-conception. All these various forms of life are based on the same concept that the life of the personality is not a sufficient aim of life and that the meaning of life can be found only in the aggregate of personalities.]

The man with the divine life-conception no longer recognizes life to consist in his personality, or in the aggregate of personalities (in the family, the race, the people, the country, or the state), but in the source of the everlasting, immortal life, in God; and to do God's will he sacrifices his personal and domestic and social good. The prime mover of his religion is love. And his religion is the worship in deed and in truth of the beginning of everything, of God.

The whole historical life of humanity is nothing but a gradual transition from the personal, the animal life-conception, to the social, and from the social to the divine. The whole history of the ancient nations, which

lasted for thousands of years and which came to a conclusion with the history of Rome, is the history of the substitution of the social and the political life-conception for the animal, the personal. The whole history since the time of imperial Rome and the appearance of Christianity has been the history of the substitution of the divine life-conception for the political, and we are passing through it even now.

I love his optimism in this view. He believes we as humanity are at a turning point; things will gradually change for the better, society will pass into a state where there are no ruling powers, violence and force no longer exist, a society based on mutual aid, and all our actions will spring from love and the realization we are all brothers and sisters.

It's a beautiful idea. But i can't help wondering if he would have written the same thing after the two world wars. And if his argument for non-resistance to evil would still stand when he learned of the demonic ISIS. It doesn't mean i disagree or think him naive. I just wish i could find a version of his philosophy that could actually be realized in a world like this. I strongly agree that violence is never the answer. But turning the other cheek would never have worked to stop Hitler. Right?

Bonnie Shores says

Working on review. Seriously. ?

Tyler says

Recommended by a friend. Just started it today.

I can't make up my mind whether I am in love with or outraged by Tolstoy's emphatically constructed case for pacifism. It makes me want to strangle the man.

UPDATE:

I skimmed over a lot of Tolstoy's polemics. I enjoyed his critiques of Christianity more than his case for pacifism. My caveat is personal: I prefer a more nuanced argument.

If you don't mind the polemic style, Tolstoy actually lays out a good case for pacifism especially based upon a Christian morality.

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Tolstoy uses Jesus' words amply. He points out that many believe that Jesus' teachings "can have no other significance than the one they attribute to it." But that only adds to the irony elsewhere, when he suggests that Jesus' words against resistance should be used as an excuse to stop paying taxes. Jesus was quite clearly of a different mindset, and said "Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's" to those who asked whether it was lawful to pay taxes. The point's pretty simple, and it's one Tolstoy completely ignores: the government literally makes the money in the first place, so if the government wants part of their money back, that's their business.

Elsewhere, too, Tolstoy's generalizations invite argument, not agreement. "We do know by prolonged experience that neither enemies nor criminals have been successfully suppressed by force," he says, obviously speaking without the benefit of World War II as a historical example, although one ends up surprised that he didn't make more reference to Napoleon's defeat, a topic which he obviously covered at far greater length elsewhere. A better argument, perhaps, would rely on the moral consequences to the victors, rather than the physical outcomes. (Perhaps the best illustration of this, oddly enough, was near the end of "Return of the Jedi," where Luke finds himself transformed by the mere act of resisting the Emperor.) It's hard to claim that resistance is wrong because it doesn't work; there are those who will always argue that it does. The bigger issue, perhaps, is that it makes you similar to what you're resisting.

Tolstoy's long-winded. He departs from the Gospel message in at least one key regard. He relies on evidence for some assertions but also makes plenty of unsupported allegations and blanket generalizations. (Some of these do seem oddly timeless and apropos of our current age, as for instance when he says that scientists see Christianity "as a religion which has outlived its age" and that "[t]he significance of the Gospel is hidden from believers by the Church, from unbelievers by Science.") Yet the many areas where he amplifies Jesus' teachings make for a thought-provoking read that also might cause some soul searching, whatever one's religious or political persuasion.

Tom McKone says

Tolstoy is my favorite writer.

'The Kingdom of God Is Within You' is a book that heavily influenced Gandhi in his epic battle for justice and compassion within and, then, against the British Empire.

It is not what you might think though. It is heavily censorious of prevailing assumptions in Christianity as they were practiced in the 18th century.

Tolstoy is a radical and allows Christians no wriggle room. You are either a believer and follow the spirit and teachings of Jesus or you are not. It is only in living by the teachings that one becomes a Christian. He gives very little attention to any Christologies. What one may believe about the afterlife has very little sway here.

His main criticism of religion is that it might actually serve as an obfuscation and hinder one in ascertaining the real message and value of Jesus' teachings. Religion might prevent Jesus from coming into one's life. Christ is what most people want; a simple affirmation. But, to Tolstoy, belief requires more. Hence, a point of view: no Jesus, no Christ.

Kristen says

Mhatma Ghandi said of this book, "Tolstoy's The Kingdom of God is Within You overwhelmed me. It left an abiding impression on me. Before the independent thinking, profound morality and the truthfulness of this book, all the books given me...seemed to pale into insignificance." This was lovingly written in the cover of the book when I picked it out of pile of books destined for recycling, where the hard covers would be ripped off and the pages put through the recycling bin. I could not toss this book. My brother (a professor of English studies) pointed out to me the geneology of its publication, how ever year of its reissuing was during a massive era of change (World War II and the civil rights movement.). I do love this book. I am a slow reader. It will be a slow arduous journey through this book, but I am certain it will be worth it.

Bryan says

I think this book has a lot of great merits, yet I cannot rate something such as this higher when it has so strange a premise:

Tolstoy postulates that Christ didn't live, that we don't need a living Savior, and that Christianity is two-thirds deception, and then he says that the principles which Christ taught are going to save the world.

It's a remarkable example of throwing the baby out with the bath water.

If there is any reason to live the gospel of Christ at all, it is because Christ lived, and that what he taught is so completely non-fiction that we ought to spend our entire lives developing faith and understanding in it.

Tolstoy had a penchant for rejecting everyone and everything. From my limited impression of his work, there's not a thing in the world he accepted other than his own--and self-proclaimed as ever insufficient--perspective on truth.

Now, all that being said, I think his application of Christian virtues is beautiful. He gives strong encouragement to his reader to chose to live the gospel "right now," to recognize that all of the accomplishments of man can and are washed away in the blink of an eye, and to focus on developing compassion.

The book also was one of Gandhi's most influential sources for the development of Non-Violence, and when you read this book you will notice the massive foundation it laid for Gandhi.

It was not well-received when it was written--being banned by Russia and, when Germany printed it, it never sold very heavily--and I believe that was because of the fact that he let go of Christ's hand in his writing in order to have more room to hold onto Christ's lesson scrolls, but it's definitely worth the read if you have the time.

You can listen to it on MP3 for free on Librivox.org, and the reading is pretty good:
<http://librivox.org/the-kingdom-of-go...>

Ellen Matheson says

Beautiful, challenging philosophy from Tolstoy in his final years. His central premise is the importance of aspiring to be truly Christian even as we live in a world controlled by corrupt governments and religions. In Tolstoy's perfect world, nations would disband all governments, courts, militaries, and even the concept of nationhood itself, as all of these entities contribute to division and conflict - inherently un-Christian realities. But it is not the concept of this perfect world that differentiates Tolstoy from other great philosophers. It is his claim about how to build such a world: Every individual must recognize for herself what is true [i.e. Christian] and what is false. This *act of recognition* presents the greatest challenge to Christians living in the modern world as governments and religions effectively obscure our understanding of Christ's teaching.

"The sole meaning of life is to serve humanity by contributing to the establishment of the kingdom of God, which can only be done by the recognition and profession of the truth by every man." (p. 368)

Harrison says

What does a nation established in Christ's principles look like?

Does it wage war?

Does it maintain a standing army?

Does it manufacture nuclear weapons? Landmines? Assault rifles? Hand guns?

Does it torture people?

Waterboard people?

Imprison people?

Are there poor people in a Christian nation?

Are there rich people in a Christian nation?

Does a woman die from hunger in a Christian nation?

Does she die from preventable disease?

Does anyone aspire to wealth in a Christian nation?

Does anyone aspire to power?

When you give these questions anything more than cursory thought, they're troubling questions indeed. Leo Tolstoy (of War and Peace fame) found himself struggling with these questions at the end of the 19th century as the nations of Europe rattled sabers and amassed massive armies in the lead-up to the first world war. Germany, Russia, France, and England all considered themselves Christian nations, yet each rallied for war, ready to murder each other by the millions against the direct prohibition of their God.

Today the governor of Texas organizes public prayer for rain while also supporting the death penalty. A presidential candidate accentuate the words "under God," while swearing allegiance not to that God but to a nation. With a cross pinned to his lapel, a politician fights to cut funding for services to the sick and to the poor. In this midst of this, the hard analysis that Tolstoy puts forth about what it truly means to be a Christian nation is more important than ever.

In imagining a Christian society, Tolstoy looks not to Deuteronomy or Leviticus whose strict legalism lends itself to the loophole-seeking of the Pharisees, but to the Sermon on the Mount. He looks to Jesus's commandment to "love one another as I have loved you." Rather than a legal code, Jesus' commandments were appeals to the heart, statements that awoken men's consciences to the suffering that they were causing one another so that they may truly repent of this injustice. This is the revelation of Truth, the opening of blind eyes.

To live in this Truth is not just to speak it, but to have it guide every action. This is easy enough when dealing with our families and sometimes even our neighbors. We can forgive insults, respond to hatred with love, and exhibit great generosity with our loved ones. Yet, as we expand outwards to social action, Christ's true challenge becomes apparent. Referring to the opening questions, do I feel that there is a difference between Christ's response and the practical response?

The great hypocrisy of war-mongering Christians deeply disturbed Tolstoy in his day, and it should likewise both every Christian of conscience today. Do we only follow Christ's teaching in the small and convenient actions, the street-corner preaching and public acts of generosity that make us feel self-righteous, or do we follow it when it's difficult?

It is not difficult to wave a picture of an aborted fetus in front of a Planned Parenthood building. It is difficult to provide a pregnant mother with the social and financial support she needs to continue the pregnancy. Which do we do?

It is not difficult for an American to preach an end to human rights abuses in Iran. It is difficult for an American to take a stand against torture carried out by our own government. Which do we do?

It is not difficult to wear TOMS shoes and Falling Whistles necklaces. It is difficult to quit your job at the corporation that profits from the exploitation of the poor and vulnerable. Which do we do?

Tolstoy's thesis is that a veneer of Christianity does not make either a person or a nation Christian. It is the integration of Christ's principles into every individual action in my life and the refusal to cooperate with anything that is counter to those principles.

It's a bold proposition, indeed. When Mohandas Gandhi read *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* while he was in South Africa, it helped inspire his first Satyagraha campaign against the abuses of the British. What revolution is in store for America if we too could take this message to heart?

What happens when Christian consumers refuse to support businesses that exploit their workers, but support worker cooperatives instead?

What happens when Christian juries refuse to condemn drug addicts to jail, but open drug treatment programs instead?

What happens when Christian men and women refuse to join the military, but join interfaith groups to build bridges of understanding instead?

These are the questions that Tolstoy asks and they're deeply challenging for those who prefer a convenient Christianity that asks nothing of its followers except a Sunday lip service and a cross hung around the neck. Christ's Truth was revolutionary and he was hung on a cross between two revolutionaries for it. What happens when Christians take up that revolutionary charge today?

Stas Sajin says

you will feel yourself better and more truth-loving after having read this.

"We are all brothers—and yet every morning a brother or a sister must empty the bedroom slops for me. We are all brothers, but every morning I must have a cigar, a sweetmeat, an ice, and such things, which my brothers and sisters have been wasting their health in manufacturing, and I enjoy these things and demand them. We are all brothers, yet I live by working in a bank, or mercantile house, or shop at making all goods dearer for my brothers. We are all brothers, but I live on a salary paid me for prosecuting, judging, and condemning the thief or the prostitute whose existence the whole tenor of my life tends to bring about, and who I know ought not to be punished but reformed. We are all brothers, but I live on the salary I gain by collecting taxes from needy laborers to be spent on the luxuries of the rich and idle. We are all brothers, but I take a stipend for preaching a false Christian religion, which I do not myself believe in, and which only serve's to hinder men from understanding true Christianity. I take a stipend as priest or bishop for deceiving men in the matter of the greatest importance to them. We are all brothers, but I will not give the poor the benefit of my educational, medical, or literary labors except for money. We are all brothers, yet I take a salary for being ready to commit murder, for teaching men to murder, or making firearms, gunpowder, or fortifications."

Eric says

I have considered this since I read it probably 6 years ago to be my favorite book, or at least the book that has challenged me the most. It's as powerful of a testament to Christian nonviolence as I imagine has ever been written. Probably it's most well-known claim to fame is that Gandhi cites it as the book that influenced him most in his life, even though he was a devout Hindu.

mic boshans says

Never mind the cover. This book is amazing!

One of the most important books I've ever read...

Read the description; I think it's pretty right on.

If you've ever called yourself a Christian, this is a must read. If you think Christians are misguided or even dangerous, you should read this book. If you like certain aspects of Christianity but think that organized religion is a crock, you should read this book. If you think war is a necessary evil, read this book. If you think Gandhi was on to something, you should read this book. If you consider yourself an anarchist, you should read this book. If you think anarchists are ridiculous, you should read this book. If you haven't read this book, you should read this book.

Kevin says

The book one may want to keep next to the Holy Bible at home. A book that one may not just 'read' but absorb, assimilate and learn to the core till he transforms himself into a wholly new being. Amazing read; probably the book to deserve the first place in my library.

Tolstoy in his own words: (selected passages)

"Not to speak of all the other contradictions between modern life and the conscience, the permanently armed conditions of Europe together with its profession of Christianity is alone enough to drive any man to despair, to doubt of the sanity of mankind, and to terminate an existence in this senseless and brutal world. This contradiction, which is a quintessence of all the other contradictions, is so terrible that to live and to take part in it is only possible if one does not think of it-if one is able to forget it."

"They (Governments) pretend to support temperance societies, while they are living principally on the drunkenness of the people; and pretend to encourage education, when their whole strength is based on ignorance; and to support constitutional freedom, when their strength rests on the absence of freedom; and to be anxious for the improvement of the condition of the working classes, when their very existence depends on their oppression; and to support Christianity, when Christianity destroys all government."

(More on this please visit <http://kevmcn.wordpress.com/2014/04/1...>)

Moon Rose says

If Dostoevsky triggered the awakening of my consciousness...Somehow Tolstoy put words into it with this sublime book. Dostoevsky's philosophies enabled my mind to plunge deeper into the depths of my soul, the wisdom was attained yet it was difficult to articulate it into words, not until I came across this book, *The Kingdom Of God Is Within You* by Tolstoy. It reflects Tolstoy's belief that a society of peace, harmony and love is possible and only in our midst, if only we could learn to live in Jesus' teaching--nonresistance to evil by force--of TURNING THE OTHER CHEEK, of FORGIVENESS, which even in today's world, plagued with wars, greed, utter chaos, is apparently very much absent. In reality, it looks like Tolstoy fails to convey this simple and yet profound message during his time and up until now. Most people will perhaps just shrug their shoulders and move on upon reading the book and fail to see the penetrating light that the book gives. Not knowing fully that this book will enable them to awaken their consciousness thereby allowing them to see the way to life's true purpose. Nonresistance, non judgment are in simple word..FORGIVENESS..Often associated with weakness yet it is a true sign of strength. Through this, you open yourself to the Divine and instead of separating yourself from HIM, you include yourself to the Divine Whole and align yourself to the true universal destiny....Perhaps, resistance and violence that result to more sufferings, are also part of the Great Design since it is only through suffering, when we are on the brink of precipice, that we learn to change.....

Rick says

It's easier to go along with the flow of life than it is to stand firm on eternal truths and thus to oppose

political and religious paradigms. Sure enough Tolstoy can find dozens of ways to state his case that Christianity is good and organized religion is not. And every way is relevant and true. Church complicity with worldly authorities, ready to support the violence of war and the oppression of the weak is quite at odds with the messages of Jesus Christ himself.

Read this (p. 317): "...it is madness to remain under the roof of a building which cannot support its weight, and that we must leave it. And indeed it is difficult to imagine a position more wretched than that of the Christian world today, with its nations armed against one another, with its constantly increasing taxation to maintain its armies, with the hatred of the working class for the rich ever growing more intense, with Damocles sword of war hanging over the heads of all, ready every instant to fall sooner or later."

Whew! And this was written in 1894!

David Lentz says

I have read two of Tolstoy's other masterpieces in "War and Peace" and "Anna Karenina." For all the brilliant prose in these two works of penultimate genius, to really understand the heart of the novelist writing about his society, these essays lend powerful insight. The essays begin as Tolstoy rides a train with soldiers sent to beat Russian peasants who have lodged a complaint against a rich landowner bent upon cutting down a forest, with which serfs had always enjoyed common rights, for the profit in the timber. After a judge's unjust verdict in favor of the landowner, after the serfs send packing the men who appeared to cut their timber, the landowner requests government troops to enforce the unjust verdict by beating the serfs to death with rods packed onboard the train. Tolstoy examines this great chain of injustice from the rich landowner's arrogance and greed, to the government judge's feeble acquiescence to power, to the soldiers' blind obedience to administer the famished serfs' inhumane punishment and asks why any of this must play out as it does. How often has this great chain of injustice perpetuated itself upon humanity? Does this chain not define and institutionalize the greatest instances of inhumanity in the course of history? Tolstoy asks earnestly why each of the players in the administration of this injustice just doesn't try to make a true "moral effort." Why doesn't the rich landowner recognize his own arrogance and greed and duty to the serfs? Why doesn't the government intercede and stand up to the landowner's will to power? Why don't the soldiers refuse to administer mindlessly this injustice? Why must famished, diseased and half-dead peasants be beaten to death as they simply try to survive? Who wins in this oft repeated scenario? Not a dead soul. Tolstoy's argument is that we have the ethical wherewithal at every level to stand-up to such injustice and he makes the argument as a wealthy Russian landowner, former soldier and provincial administrator with great influence upon the tsar. In other words he is fully qualified by virtue of experience to argue this case and he makes it with a profundity and simplicity which is inspiring. "There is one thing, and only one thing, in which it is granted to you to be free in life, all else being beyond your power: that is to recognize and profess the truth." Tolstoy's thesis is that the Power to do this exists within every person and that it is the divine responsibility of each of us to exercise this power for the good and happiness of humanity. Tolstoy sees a threefold relationship of man to truth: "Some truths have been so assimilated by them that they become the unconscious basis of action, others are just only on the point of being revealed and a third class, though not yet assimilated by him, have been revealed to him with sufficient clearness to force him to decide either to recognize them or refuse to recognize them." Tolstoy urges mankind simply to make a moral effort and he advises that the happiness open to mankind is available only if and when we do so. Why don't we make more of a moral effort? There is great wisdom in this work which I urge you, despite the daunting title, to read as it is wisdom from a century and a half ago, that no generation of humanity may need more than our own right now.

Helen says

Things your ordinary citizen thinks when he hears "Leo Tolstoy":

- Some damn commie Russian
- Yeah, I think I heard some of them literary people mention him. Whatever. Speaking of literature, I need to go buy new Dan Brown.
- That dude who wrote that long-ass book about war or something no one ever really finished. LBR, they all use Cliffnotes for book reports.
- The one who wrote that famous tragic forbidden love story between a married woman and a hot officer. I've seen the movie(s) (KK is my homegirl!), but then I opened the book and it was full of some guy talking about peasants and shit. It was a bore. The movie was much better.
- A very important Russian writer. I've tried reading some of his work, but it's not for me.

Things I wish more people would know about Leo Tolstoy:

- He was an anarchist
- He might have been Christian, but he was not a fan of the way Church has been interpreting the religion. Thus, this book was born.
- One day, a young lawyer named Mohandas Gandhi read this book.

Onto the Part 2

(FLAG AWAY!)
