

Leo Tolstoy: Russia's Literary Giant and Moral Philosopher

Abstract

Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) was a Russian novelist and thinker whose life journey spanned from aristocratic origins to literary greatness and finally to spiritual asceticism. He is widely regarded as one of the greatest writers of all time, celebrated for monumental novels like *War and Peace* (1869) and *Anna Karenina* (1877) ¹. Tolstoy's early life of privilege and youthful restlessness gave way to a profound moral awakening in mid-life. At the height of his fame, he experienced an existential crisis that led him to renounce luxury, embrace a simple life, and advocate for nonviolence grounded in Christian ethics ². In his later years, he emerged as a moral philosopher whose ideas on peace and universal love influenced figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. ². Over a century later, Tolstoy's literary masterpieces and ethical teachings continue to inspire readers and humanitarians worldwide, underscoring his enduring significance in both literature and social thought.

Early Life and Literary Career

Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy was born into an aristocratic family at Yasnaya Polyana, the Tolstoy estate about 200 km south of Moscow, on September 9, 1828 (August 28 in the old Russian calendar) ³. Orphaned at a young age – his mother died before he was two and his father when he was nine – Tolstoy was raised by relatives in a loving but conservative noble household ³. These early experiences of loss and the contrast between his privileged upbringing and the lives of peasant serfs on his estate left a deep impression on him. As a youth, Tolstoy struggled with formal education, abandoning his university studies in Kazan and leading a somewhat dissolute life in his twenties ⁴. Seeking purpose, he joined the Russian Army in the 1850s and served as an artillery officer during the Crimean War, where he witnessed harrowing violence firsthand ⁵ ⁶. His wartime experiences, including the Siege of Sevastopol, inspired his earliest published stories (*Sevastopol Sketches*) and instilled in him a lifelong aversion to the senseless brutality of war ⁶. Even at this early stage, Tolstoy's writings drew on his own life, blurring the line between fiction and personal memoir.

Returning from military service, Tolstoy embarked on a literary career that soon vaulted him to the forefront of Russian literature. He first gained attention with a semi-autobiographical trilogy – *Childhood*, *Boyhood*, and *Youth* (1852–1856) – which chronicled a young nobleman's coming of age and subtly critiqued the social divide between nobles and peasants ⁷. However, it was his later epic novels that immortalized him. Tolstoy married Sofiya Behrs in 1862, and with her support as a devoted copyist and editor, he spent the 1860s crafting his masterpiece *War and Peace* ⁸. Published in 1869, *War and Peace* is a sweeping saga of Russian lives during the Napoleonic Wars, interweaving the fates of aristocrats and commoners against the backdrop of historical events ¹. This monumental novel was groundbreaking in its realism and philosophical depth; it painted a panoramic portrait of society while probing big questions about fate, free will, and the ravages of war. Tolstoy followed with *Anna Karenina* (serialized in the 1870s, published in 1877), a towering achievement in psychological realism that explores love, infidelity, and the constraints of social

norms through the tragic story of Anna and the rural philosophy of Konstantin Levin ¹. Upon its completion, Tolstoy himself considered *Anna Karenina* his first true novel, distinguishing it from the historical epic form of *War and Peace* ⁹ ¹⁰. Together, these two works cemented Tolstoy's status as a literary giant. Admirers as illustrious as Fyodor Dostoevsky and Gustave Flaubert praised Tolstoy's artistry and insight into human psychology ¹¹. Later critics would echo this reverence – Virginia Woolf declared him “the greatest of all novelists” ¹². By the late 1870s, Tolstoy had achieved world renown as an author whose novels set a new standard for realism and narrative scope in world literature.

Yet, even as he basked in literary success, Tolstoy was growing increasingly restless and philosophically dissatisfied. The acclaim for *Anna Karenina* did little to quiet his inner turmoil. He was haunted by questions about life's meaning and guilt over the gap between his lofty ideals and the reality of his aristocratic life. According to his diaries, around the time he finished *Anna Karenina* Tolstoy fell into a state of despair so severe that he hid ropes and firearms from himself, fearing he might succumb to suicidal thoughts ¹³. This spiritual crisis would mark a dramatic turning point in his life – one that led him away from writing novels and into a radical re-examination of faith, morality, and his purpose. (The details of Tolstoy's existential crisis and transformation are explored in a later section.) Despite this impending shift, Tolstoy's contributions to literature were already monumental: he had proven how the novel could encompass the breadth of history and the depths of individual hearts, leaving an indelible mark on world literature.

Tolstoy's Views on Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)

In his later years, Leo Tolstoy's spiritual inquiries extended beyond Christianity, leading him to develop a deep respect for Islam and its Prophet, Muhammad (peace be upon him). Tolstoy approached the Quran and Islamic teachings with an open mind and found much that resonated with his own moral ideals. He was especially impressed by Islam's uncompromising monotheism and the absence of complex dogmas. In a conversation recorded by his physician in 1909, Tolstoy remarked admiringly that **“Muhammad has always been standing higher than Christianity. He does not think man as God and never makes himself equal to God. Muslims do not have any other gods but God and Muhammad is His messenger. There is no secret and doubt in it.”** ¹⁴. In this striking statement, Tolstoy favorably compared the Islamic understanding of God to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, praising the clarity of Islam's theology. He observed that Muslims worship one God without intermediary, which to Tolstoy represented a pure and rational faith ¹⁴.

Tolstoy's engagement with Islam went beyond casual interest; he studied Islamic literature and even curated Islamic sayings for others. In 1909, he privately published a small collection titled ***Selected Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad*** – a compilation of Hadith (traditional sayings of Muhammad) and Quranic wisdom that he found morally enlightening ¹⁵ ¹⁶. In the foreword to this booklet, Tolstoy praised the Quran's spirit of tolerance and highlighted Islam's emphasis on virtues like charity and unity. He noted, for example, that the Quran calls on people to “hold fast, all together, by the rope of God, and be not divided,” a verse that he felt exemplified Islam's commitment to social harmony and brotherhood ¹⁷ ¹⁸. Tolstoy was also impressed by the character and impact of Prophet Muhammad himself. Describing Muhammad as “one of the greatest reformers who served the social community,” Tolstoy praised the Prophet for uplifting a “humiliated and bloody people” and opening for them the path of “development and progress” ¹⁹. Such comments reflected Tolstoy's view that Muhammad brought moral enlightenment to a society, guiding

people away from cruelty and towards a life of faith and civilization – an achievement Tolstoy regarded as “a great work... done only by a man gifted with power, and such a man is worthy of respect and honor.”¹⁹ .

Tolstoy did not merely admire Islam from afar; he engaged in dialogue with Muslim contemporaries in an effort to find common ethical ground. In 1904, he corresponded with the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Sheikh Muhammad Abduh, and expressed the idea that despite coming from different religious traditions, they essentially shared “**the same faith**” in terms of core principles²⁰ . “Faiths are different and there are many of them,” Tolstoy wrote to Abduh, “but there is only one faith, the true one... consisting in acknowledging God and His law, in loving one’s neighbor and doing to others what one would like done to oneself”²¹ ²² . This conviction – that all true religions carry the same fundamental message of love, compassion, and fidelity to God’s law – was central to Tolstoy’s late religious philosophy. Within this framework, Tolstoy viewed Islam as a faith that had preserved those universal truths particularly well. He believed that Islam, as a later revelation, avoided certain “misapprehensions” or corruptions that had, in his view, crept into Christianity over time²³ ²⁴ . For example, Islam’s rejection of deifying any human aligned perfectly with Tolstoy’s own rejection of the idea of Jesus as God. He even stated plainly that Islam “compared favorably” with the Orthodox Christianity of his day in its simplicity and directness of belief²⁴ .

Tolstoy’s high esteem for Islam occasionally shocked those around him in imperial Russia. In one letter, a Russian noblewoman asked Tolstoy’s advice after her sons expressed interest in converting to Islam. Tolstoy replied that **if forced to choose between the Orthodox Church and Islam, “any sensible person will not hesitate... and will prefer Islam”** with its pure monotheism over the intricate trappings of Orthodox doctrine²⁵ . Such bold commentary, coming from a famous Christian author, was virtually unheard of in his time. It fueled rumors (unfounded) that Tolstoy might secretly have converted to Islam on his deathbed, although Tolstoy remained committed to his own interpretation of Christianity until the end²⁶ . In truth, what Tolstoy embraced was not a new formal religion, but a universalist perspective that transcended denominational boundaries. He saw in Islam a reflection of the same eternal truths he sought in the Gospels – a reverence for one God, the call to righteousness, and an ethos of kindness and self-restraint. This open-hearted appreciation for another faith was **ahead of its time in interfaith understanding**²⁷ . While many of Tolstoy’s contemporaries dismissed his Islamic studies as an eccentric fascination of his old age, today they are often highlighted as a testament to his intellectual honesty and spiritual breadth. Tolstoy’s writings and correspondence on Islam reveal a man who, in his search for truth, was willing to learn from all faiths – a legacy of bridge-building between religions that is increasingly resonant in our diverse modern world.

Existential Crisis and Spiritual Transformation

By the late 1870s, Tolstoy’s outward success as a novelist stood in stark contrast to an inner crisis brewing within him. Having achieved literary immortality, he found himself asking the most basic questions: What is the meaning of life? Why do I exist, and how should I live? This period of profound soul-searching – which Tolstoy later recounted in his autobiographical book *A Confession* – nearly overwhelmed him with despair²⁸ . He was tormented by the thought that all the accomplishments and pleasures of the world were futile in the face of mortality. In *A Confession*, written in the early 1880s, Tolstoy candidly describes how he even contemplated suicide during this dark night of the soul¹³ . Ultimately, he found a way out of his existential dread by embracing a radical spiritual transformation. Rejecting the hollow pursuit of worldly success, Tolstoy turned wholeheartedly to the moral teachings of Jesus – particularly the **Sermon on the Mount**, with its emphasis on humility, love, and turning the other cheek²⁸ . He concluded that living for God and

for goodness was the only true purpose of life. This epiphany sparked what Tolstoy viewed as an equally profound *spiritual awakening* to match his earlier crisis ²⁹ .

After this conversion experience, Tolstoy reinvented himself as a kind of Christian moral philosopher and wandering sage. He adopted a **literal interpretation of Christ's teachings**, especially the commandments to "resist not evil" and to love one's enemies ²⁸ . In the early 1880s he published *What I Believe* (1884), in which he openly renounced the doctrines of the established church and outlined his personal understanding of Christ's message. Tolstoy's new faith led him to **renounce organized religion and many worldly trappings**, an orientation often described as **Christian anarchism**. He denounced the Orthodox Church hierarchy and sacraments as corruptions, which in turn prompted the Holy Synod (the church authority) to excommunicate Tolstoy in 1901 ³⁰ . Unfazed by his excommunication, Tolstoy maintained that true religion was to be found not in rituals or dogmas but in living a life of love, truth, and nonviolence. He came to reject much of modern society's values and even criticized his own earlier literary masterpieces as spiritually empty "counterfeit art," since they did not explicitly promote the brotherly love he now prized ¹⁰ . Instead, Tolstoy devoted his later years to writing essays, pamphlets, and fiction that conveyed his ethical and religious ideas. His last novel, *Resurrection* (1899), for example, was a scathing indictment of social injustice and the hypocrisy of church and state, reflecting Tolstoy's desire to use art as a vehicle for moral truth ³¹ .

Central to Tolstoy's transformation was his commitment to **asceticism and simple living**. In the fashion of saints and sages before him, Tolstoy chose to give up his aristocratic privileges and live more like the peasants he had once idealized. He dressed in plain peasant clothes, learned farming and shoemaking, and insisted on doing manual labor at his estate. He also underwent a gradual conversion to **vegetarianism**, motivated by the ethic of compassion. By 1890 Tolstoy had adopted a strictly meatless diet, convinced that killing animals for food was morally wrong ³² ³³ . He associated a vegetarian diet with "high moral views on life" and viewed hunting or eating meat as "**a moral evil**" incompatible with his ideals of nonviolence ³⁴ ³³ . This was just one aspect of Tolstoy's broader philosophy of self-discipline. He gave up drinking and smoking, practiced sexual abstinence later in life, and tried to minimize his material possessions. Tolstoy's dramatic personal changes caused tension within his household – his wife Sonya, who had been his closest collaborator in earlier years, felt alienated and alarmed by his extreme convictions ³⁵ ³⁶ . Their once-happy marriage deteriorated as Tolstoy attempted to renounce his wealth and even sought to give away the copyrights to his books (an act Sonya vehemently opposed) ³⁵ .

Despite domestic strife, Tolstoy persevered in living out his principles and spreading his message to the world. He emerged as a **fervent pacifist**, arguing that violence only begets more violence, and that true Christians must reject all war and coercion. In 1894, he published *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, a seminal work laying out his doctrine of nonviolent resistance to evil. In it, Tolstoy contended that governments rest on brute force and deception, and he urged people to follow their conscience and Christ's law of love rather than the laws of states. These ideas fell on receptive ears far beyond Russia. *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* would go on to inspire social reformers and freedom fighters around the globe ³⁷ . Most famously, a young Indian lawyer in South Africa by the name of **Mahatma Gandhi** read Tolstoy's book and was deeply moved. Gandhi began a correspondence with Tolstoy, seeking advice on overcoming injustice, and Tolstoy's replies (including a stirring 1908 letter titled "A Letter to a Hindu") counseled that only love and nonviolent resistance can defeat hatred ³⁸ . Tolstoy's philosophy helped **convince Gandhi of the power of nonviolence**, directly influencing the strategy of the Indian independence movement decades later ³⁹ . Gandhi acknowledged Tolstoy as one of his greatest teachers, and the two men continued to exchange letters until Tolstoy's final months. Tolstoy's ethical writings likewise impacted other

visionary leaders: civil rights champion **Martin Luther King Jr.** and many early 20th-century pacifists found inspiration in Tolstoy's advocacy of nonviolent civil disobedience ³⁹. In embracing pacifism, Tolstoy truly put to practice the Christian ideal of "turning the other cheek," and through his influence on others, this ideal would shape historic movements for justice and peace.

Tolstoy's final years were those of a venerated but troubled sage. He was surrounded by disciples (the so-called "Tolstoyans") who flocked to Yasnaya Polyana to learn from him, even as his family life grew ever more strained. Finally, in November 1910, at the age of 82, Tolstoy felt he could no longer live in compromise with his ideals. In the dead of night, he **secretly fled his home**, leaving behind a letter renouncing his wealth and title, intent on living out his days as a wandering ascetic ³⁶. Accompanied only by a doctor friend, the aging count traveled meekly by train until he fell gravely ill en route. **Leo Tolstoy died of pneumonia at a remote railway station** – Astapovo station – on November 20, 1910 ³⁶. The image of the world-famous novelist breathing his last in a humble stationmaster's house, far from the comforts of his estate, was a poignant final chapter that captivated global attention. Tolstoy's funeral was attended by thousands of peasants and admirers, and even in his final hours he was reportedly preaching love and nonviolence to those around him ⁴⁰. In death, as in life, Tolstoy remained true to the principles he had discovered in his spiritual rebirth. His personal transformation—from disillusioned aristocrat to fervent moral prophet—stands as one of the most remarkable in cultural history, illustrating the possibility of profound change and the power of conscience awakened.

Epilogue: Tolstoy's Legacy and Continued Relevance

More than a century after his passing, Leo Tolstoy's legacy endures on multiple fronts: as a literary titan, as a moral and religious thinker, and as an unexpected bridge between cultures. In literature, Tolstoy's influence is immeasurable. He revolutionized the art of the novel, proving that fiction could capture the totality of human experience. His great novels remain staples of world literature, read by millions in countless languages. Fellow writers continue to revere him; indeed, the English author Virginia Woolf's assertion that Tolstoy was "the greatest of all novelists" is a sentiment often shared by critics and readers alike ⁴¹. *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* frequently top lists of the finest literary works ever written, and their philosophical and psychological richness has set a benchmark for narrative ambition ⁴¹. Tolstoy's storytelling techniques, from his use of realism and minute detail to his exploration of characters' inner lives, helped shape the modern novel. Prominent authors from Anton Chekhov to James Joyce to William Faulkner have admired and learned from Tolstoy's prose ⁴² ⁴³. Remarkably, despite his towering reputation, Tolstoy never received the Nobel Prize in Literature (though nominated repeatedly) – a fact sometimes cited as one of the great oversights in Nobel history ⁴⁴. Nonetheless, his literary genius has been acknowledged in every other way: through scholarly study, adaptations of his works into films and theater, and the continued popular devotion to his novels.

Tolstoy's **ethical and social legacy** is just as profound. His life and writings helped ignite a tradition of nonviolent activism that would change the course of the 20th century. Figures like **Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.** drew direct inspiration from Tolstoy's message that love is stronger than hate and that a just society cannot be built on violence ³⁹. In this way, Tolstoy's ideas contributed to the success of movements for Indian independence and African-American civil rights, among others. He is remembered as one of the great apostles of nonviolence and compassion. Tolstoy's name has also become synonymous with spiritual integrity – the notion that one should *live* according to one's convictions. Communities of followers (the "Tolstoyans") sprang up after his death, attempting to practice his ideals of pacifism, communal living, and equality. Even today, Tolstoy's essays on love, government, and religion continue to challenge readers to

reconsider the basis of ethical living. He demonstrated through his own example the importance of personal conscience in social reform. In recognition of his contributions to peace, Tolstoy was posthumously acclaimed around the world; it is often noted that he was nominated multiple times for the Nobel Peace Prize as well (in 1901, 1902, 1909), though he never won ⁴⁴. The dual Nobel nominations – for literature and for peace – neatly symbolize Tolstoy’s unique place in history at the intersection of art and moral leadership.

Finally, Tolstoy’s life offers enduring lessons for **interfaith dialogue and universal spirituality**. Unlike many of his peers, Tolstoy did not insist on the exclusive righteousness of his own religious tradition. Instead, he sought wisdom in diverse faiths and found a common ground in the ethical teachings of Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and other religions ²² ⁴⁵. His correspondence with Muslim, Hindu, and other religious leaders was pioneering for its time, emphasizing mutual respect and shared values. Tolstoy’s willingness to openly praise the Prophet Muhammad and the Quran – at a time when doing so was unconventional in Christian Europe – showcased an attitude of bridge-building that resonates strongly today ²⁰ ²¹. Modern scholars recognize that **Tolstoy was ahead of his time in interfaith appreciation and dialogue** ²⁷. He believed that at their core, all major religions preach the same truth of loving one’s neighbor and doing good, a perspective that anticipates today’s calls for interfaith harmony ²². In an era when understanding between different cultures and religions is so vital, Tolstoy’s example of sincere curiosity and respect across religious lines remains highly relevant. Both in his writings and his personal journey, Tolstoy championed a vision of the human family united by conscience and compassion, rather than divided by creed.

Leo Tolstoy’s story is thus more than the biography of a great writer; it is the tale of a soul in search of truth. His legacy lives on each time a reader is moved by the humanity of *War and Peace* or *Anna Karenina*, each time a protester practices nonviolence in the face of injustice, and each time people of different faiths find common humanity through dialogue. Tolstoy once wrote, “There is only one lasting happiness in life – to live for others.” He indeed strove to live by that principle. Remembered as a literary genius, a spiritual teacher, and a courageous moral voice, Tolstoy continues to speak to us across time, inviting us to reflect on our own lives and on what it means to lead a good life. His life’s journey—from selfishness to selflessness, from worldly success to spiritual significance—remains a powerful reminder of the transformative power of faith, love, and literature to change individuals and, ultimately, the world ⁴⁶.

Sources: Tolstoy’s own writings and letters; *Leo Tolstoy* by A.N. Wilson; Encyclopædia Britannica; **Z. H. Shah**, “Leo Tolstoy’s Views on the Quran and Muhammad” ³ ¹⁴; Wikipedia ²⁸ ³⁰.

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<https://thequran.love/2025/03/15/leo-tolstoys-views-on-the-quran-a-detailed-analysis/>

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¹⁹ ²⁵ ²⁶ Tolstoy on Islam. Tolstoy on 23 May 1908 at Yasnaya... | by Sa’id Abdul Latif (Hilarion Heagy) | Medium

<https://medium.com/@SaidAbdulLatif/tolstoy-on-islam-4c6f97439e36>