

## Spiritual Educator in Leo Tolstoy

**Dr. Geeta Monga**

*Principal, Shah Satnam ji Girls' College, Sirsa*

*Email Id: geetamonga69@gmail.com*

### Abstract

This paper considers the often overlooked religious and educational works of the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910). After outlining Tolstoy's life, religious and educational views, it is argued that Tolstoy has much to offer spiritual educators today. In particular, it suggests Tolstoy's insistence on the absolute and eternal nature of spiritual and moral truths; coupled with a free and heuristic pedagogy, are key ingredients of an authentic spiritual education.

**Key words:** *Tolstoy; spirituality; education; spiritual development; pedagogy; religious education*

Tolstoy was a great spiritual educator. This is evident in his far ranging influence as a religious writer and his lesser known work as a teacher and pedagogical thinker. These facets of Tolstoy's genius are often obscured by his status as one of the world's greatest novelists. However, his novels also contain strong spiritual themes and particularly later in life, Tolstoy saw the artist's purpose as a didactic one: to lead others to moral and spiritual truth.

### A spiritual journey

Born into the Russian aristocracy, Tolstoy was orphaned at nine. As a child he played in the woods at his estate, Yasnaya Polyana, with his brother. One game they played was searching for the green stick, which his brother said was the key to the meaning of true happiness. By the age of fifteen he chose to wear a medallion portrait of Rousseau next to his body instead of an Orthodox cross (Maude: 1908: 46). He read Rousseau's entire oeuvre which would later influence his attitude to education and religion. At around this time he stopped attending church services but had a 'vague belief in something' (1900a:7).

Sickened by the lives of fellow writers and artists, Tolstoy moved back to his inherited estate where he tried to improve the lives of his peasants. He saw education as a key part of this process and so travelled to Germany, France and England to survey modern educational theory and practice. In England he attended a lecture by Dickens on education and met Matthew Arnold, the poet and schools' inspector, who gave permission for Tolstoy to visit a school in London. Tolstoy's impression of England was better than that of the schools he saw on the continent. Later in his diary he describes England as the 'the most educated country' (in Alekseeva: 2001:97). In Europe, however, he was concerned at what he saw. After observing lessons in Leipzig

he wrote: 'Have been in school- terrible. Prayer for the king, blows, everything by rote, frightened, paralysed children' (in Maude: 1908:194).

In 1859 Tolstoy set about organising schools in and around his estate according to his own radical views on education and published his findings in his own educational journal, *Yasnaya Polyana*. By 1862, however, Tolstoy had abandoned this project, married, and dedicated his time to raising a family and writing his most famous books; *War and Peace* (1864-69) and *Anna Karenin* (1873-76). After his success and worldwide fame as a result these works, Tolstoy went through a time of deep spiritual questioning. He read widely on world religions, learnt Hebrew and Greek and made his own translation of the Gospels.

Tolstoy died in a station master's house in 1910 after trying to escape from Yasnaya Polyana to a life of seclusion. He was considered in such high esteem in Russia and abroad that the telegraph system could not deal with the communications for him. Included in these, was one from a bishop asking him to come back to Orthodoxy. His attendants decided not to show him this message as when he was previously ill and had a telegram from the same bishop, he had remarked: 'Tell these Gentlemen to leave me in peace...How is it that they do not understand that even when one is face to face with death, two and two still make four' (Maude:1910:320). Tolstoy had left instructions on his burial. He wanted to have no religious ceremony or memorial, and wanted to be buried in the woods where he had played as a child with his brother looking for the greenstick.

### **A spiritual pedagogy**

Tolstoy believed that education was 'one of the most important affairs of life' (1904:Vol.XII: 268). He approached pedagogy in a practical, frank and earnest way: 'I as a teacher in my school was at once confronted with two questions: 1) What must I teach? and 2) How must I teach it?' (ibid: 284-285). To answer these questions, Tolstoy set about looking 'for those contents and methods which were readily taken up by pupils' (ibid: 287). He saw this task as essential for a teacher, otherwise he could not be 'convinced that what I taught was neither injurious nor useless' (ibid: 287). Tolstoy believed that punishments, learning for reward, competition, and the notion that students should learn to 'gain an advantage in the world' as educational blunders. For Tolstoy, 'education as a deliberate moulding of people into certain forms is sterile, illegitimate and impossible', rather it should be a 'human activity, having for its basis a desire for equality, and constant tendency to advance in knowledge' (Maude: 1908:231-232).

When evaluating the competing pedagogies of the day, Tolstoy sought their founding principles and the ultimate justification underlying them. He was against any form of instrumentalism. The higher classes had no right to forcibly educate the people in religion or other matters. He was sceptical of any approach that imposed from above, no matter how progressive the rationale: 'there arise thousands of various, strangest

theories, based on *nothing*, like those of Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel' (1967:10, my italics). He was adamant that 'the definition of pedagogy and of its aims in a philosophical sense is impossible, useless, bad and injurious' (1967:29). This is because he believed that every philosophy was borne out of a preceding one, and therefore the philosophy of one generation would only be surpassed by another. As there was no complete theory of knowledge, how could the school-system could be built upon one? He thus came to the conclusion, predating Dewey's idea of a continuum of growth, that 'the only method of education is experiment, and its only criterion freedom' (1967:31). Tolstoy also believed that this method is best sustained by a good teacher-pupil relationship. He states: a 'better question is not how I teach but 'How is the best relation to be established between given people who want to learn and others who want to teach?'' (1904: vol.xii:293).

Despite his critique of the religious education of the day, Tolstoy saw the Bible as a book of unsurpassed educational value. He believed that 'There is no book like Bible to open up a new world to the pupil and to make him without knowledge love knowledge' (1967: 310). Tolstoy thought that the Bible's poetry, its expression of 'all sides of human thought' was also useful to 'those who do not look upon the Bible as a revelation' (ibid: 310-311). He declares 'let those who deny the educational value of the Bible, who say that the Bible has outlived its usefulness, invent such a book' (ibid: 311). Tolstoy believed that religious education had to be inclusive and heuristic. He thought imagination and narrative were important to children's religious and spiritual understanding. Underpinning his use of scripture was his belief in the ability of children to comprehend it and explore it.

In *The Teaching of Jesus* (1934:346-409), published just two years before his death, Tolstoy retells and synthesises the four gospels. To guide him in this editing process, he observed what a class of village children 'grasped most easily and by what they were most attracted' when he taught them (ibid: 346). Tolstoy believed that the children should be the starting point of a teacher's work and that children's self-expression was vital to the educative process. He notes this too in his experience at school: 'the peasant children who are sent to school by their parents can every one of them express their thoughts well and correctly' (1904:vol.xii:268). Tolstoy thought that in religious education, children could be intuitively superior to adults. In a letter to Gandhi, his most famous disciple, he tells the story of a girl in a scripture lesson on the Ten Commandments. The lesson focused in the difference between 'murder' and 'killing in war'. The girl argued with the instructor, a bishop, that there was no difference so persuasively that the 'bishop fell silent and the girl went away victorious' (1978a: 707).

Tolstoy believed that religious and spiritual education can be based on the response of children to the Bible, but not exclusively so. He also used narratives and teachings from other faiths. In *A Calendar of Wisdom: a Circle of Reading*, published in 1905,

one of the three Calendars he contributed to in the first decade of the century, Tolstoy wrote a short simple story based on the life of Buddha (2000b). This was reproduced as a pamphlet and translated into English for London Peace Pagoda at the turn of the millennium. It tells the story of Prince Siddhartha brought to life in

Tolstoy's prose as a children's fable. It ends with ten precepts taken from the story, equivalent to those Tolstoy constructs from the gospels in his other works, with the Buddha concluding on his death bed:

*'Enough Ananda! Do not cry, don't worry. Sooner or later we have to part with everything that is dear to us. Is there anything eternal in the world? My friends, he added, turning towards the other disciples, 'live the way I taught you. Free yourself from the web of human passions which ensnares human beings...only the truth is indestructible and eternal. Find salvation in it'' (Tolstoy: 2000b).*

#### **Tolstoy's voice in today's debate**

What can Tolstoy contribute to the current debate on spiritual education? This paper can neither pursue all the insight Tolstoy's life's work may offer, nor survey all the current research literature in spiritual education. Instead, I aim to outline three interlinked elements in Tolstoy's thinking: his insistence on the search for absolute and eternal spiritual truths; his critique of religion, and finally his belief in the importance of a heuristic pedagogy.

Tolstoy evidently saw the pursuit of moral and spiritual truth as fundamental to spiritual education: he was not a relativist. Tolstoy's moral fables, such as *Buddha* stress this point: the truth is not only 'eternal and indestructible' but also binding. Educationalists have also emphasized the importance of 'truth' in spiritual education. Carr (1995) argues that a distinctive conception of spiritual education is possible because there are such things as 'spiritual virtues': it is the task of spiritual education to cultivate students' dispositions towards them. Hull (1999) too in his conception of spirituality as the 'achievement of humanness', identifies the importance of truth in spiritual education; contending that there is such a thing as spiritual falsehood to be found in 'religionism', and in the 'false spirituality of money'. Wright (2000) also seeks to uphold the thirst for truth in his spiritual pedagogy of critical realism. Erricker and Erricker (2000), on the other hand, base their pedagogy of spiritual education on the denial of objective spiritual truths. All knowledge is relative: a pedagogy of spiritual education should therefore promote the individual child's own construction of reality, rather than promote an understanding of the truth claims of the world's religious traditions.

A rebuttal of relativism is not the purpose of the paper (for a critique of the narrative pedagogy see Wright: 2001). However, Tolstoy's views could be considered helpful to educators because he presents a paradigm that includes heuristic principles and the importance of the individual's personal reflection, without neglecting the value of the teachings of the world's religions. For Tolstoy, spiritual truths are indeed found in religion; but religion is not the centre of spirituality: the individual's own subjective

experience is. Thus, Tolstoy's view is better represented, not as concentric circles but rather a Venn diagram of two circles. One is religion or religions; the other is the individual. Spiritual development is where they rightfully overlap.

The second area where I wish to suggest Tolstoy can help us understand the nature of spiritual education is in the complex relationship between spirituality and religion, and its history. Thatcher (1991) argues that the emergence of the notion of spirituality is due to secularisation and the cult of the individual. We can indeed see Tolstoy's religious beliefs as a reaction to secularisation and a wider modern movement endorsing a personal religion that requires no corporate participation. Copley (2000) argues that Kierkegaard, Otto, Lewis and Wittgenstein are contributors to the 'ideas roots' of our current conception of spirituality in education. Priestley (2000) also traces thinkers' contributions: Whitehead, James and again Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein. In all these thinkers, except perhaps Lewis, there is either an attempt to find the 'essence' of religion by stripping away its external and authoritarian features, or an attempt to critique these aspects in some way. Tolstoy does too: it is the truth behind the 'perversion' (1934:268) of organised religion that interested him.

Tolstoy believed that the truth ran between the two opposing ideologies of the day: atheistic materialism and Christianity. An analogy Tolstoy uses to define this is that of the definition of music (1934:168-169). A materialist definition would be 'the production of sounds with one's throat or mouth, or by applying one's hands to certain instruments' whereas the religionist would define music as 'a particular tune-the one he [sic] knows best and is fondest of- and that it ought to be taught to as many people as possible'. A true understanding of music, of course, lies in neither of these narrow conceptions. It is neither just sound nor one particular tune; it is the subjective experience of the individual consciously relating to the sound or its source. Similarly, for Tolstoy, truth does not rest in a materialistic explanation of the universe or in the authority of a religion, but in the subjective experience of a whole person in relation to the universe, its source or God.

Tolstoy's beliefs are both critical of religion but also parasitical on it. Gustafson (1989) makes the assessment of Tolstoy's religious beliefs that he is both 'resident and stranger': there are aspects of his beliefs which are clearly derivative of Orthodoxy, but in other respects he is a lone seeker. I suggest, that Tolstoy's critique of religion, illustrated in the analogy above, can offer some further insight into the relationship between spirituality and religion. Spirituality can be seen as more personal, less corporate; less dogmatic and more experiential than religion.

Spirituality, so defined, is thus in one sense a rejection of organised religion, but in another sense dependent on the wisdoms of religion. This is the view which Tolstoy upheld: at the heart of all religions were true teachings but the religions themselves 'have deteriorated over time' (1999:82-83). For Tolstoy, true spiritual development, therefore, cannot be brought about by belief on account of the authority of a religious institution: it must be located in the experience of the individual person, but this is



capable of being promoted by the teachings of a religion.

As we have seen from his pedagogical experimentation, Tolstoy believed that children should be free to form their own responses to lessons, not to learn 'truths' by rote on account of authority. His use of narrative resonates with this: the narrative of a story points readers or listeners to moral and spiritual dilemmas and encourages them to reflect upon them. While there may be a moral to the story, it is the reader who discerns and negotiates this. This conception of spiritual education has a theological as well as pedagogical basis. Tolstoy was not a fundamentalist and it is this that also makes his vision of spiritual education inclusive. Spiritual truths have to be discovered, they cannot be dictated, not least because the spiritual has an element of the indefinable and incommunicable. For example, at the end of *Anna Karenin*, Levin's spiritual enlightenment is of 'vital importance' to him but 'not to be put into words'; it is a commitment to something he does not understand, but something that is all important and life-giving:

'I shall still be as unable to understand the reason why I pray, and still go on praying-but my life now, my whole life, independently of anything that can happen to me, every minute of it is no longer as meaningless as it was before, but has a positive meaning of goodness with which I have the power to invest it' (1978b:853).

## Conclusion

*'there is no greatness where simplicity, goodness and truth are absent'*

Tolstoy: War and Peace: 1957:1268

It is possible to interpret Tolstoy as a man who was working towards a single vision: his work in literature, religion and education are interrelated and inextricably linked aspects of his spiritual yearning. In this paper I have pointed to elements of Tolstoy's life's work which help illuminate some of the vital attributes of the elusive spiritual dimension in education.

Tolstoy's spiritual pedagogy tried to develop children's own moral understanding and awareness by use of imagination and narrative, both Biblical and non-biblical. He believed that the school environment should genuinely reflect these moral values itself: education should be humane and teachers should lead by integrity, example and natural authority. The search for knowledge is to be shared by a nurturing, living and happy community. This, for Tolstoy, is how to provide the 'spiritual food of education' (1904: vol. xii: 323).

One could interpret Tolstoy's pedagogy as a form of confessionalism. It is, after all, based on the notion of working towards the 'truth'. However, Tolstoy did not see education as a way of moulding children to his principles, but rather as the promotion of an individual child's exploration of the world and their place within it. Indeed, educational ideas have to be based on *something*, and Tolstoy believed that this base

should be moral and spiritual not technical and instrumental.

Tolstoy has much to offer those concerned with understanding and promoting the spiritual dimension in schools. This article has only sketched the parameters of his life's work and its possible contribution to religious, spiritual and moral education. By way of conclusion, however, I would like to summarise Tolstoy's voice in the debate as one which calls for honesty and straightforwardness: to stress that where simplicity, goodness and truth are absent, there can be no spiritual development.

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