

This item was submitted to Loughborough's Institutional Repository (<https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/>) by the author and is made available under the following Creative Commons Licence conditions.



For the full text of this licence, please go to:
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/>

The Contemporary Relevance of Leo Tolstoy's Late Political Thought

Dr Alexandre J. M. E. Christoyannopoulos*

*University of Kent and Canterbury Christ Church University
United Kingdom*

*a [dot] christoyannopoulos [at] gmail [dot] com
<http://www.christoyannopoulos.com>*

*Paper presented at the **International Political Science Association** 21st
World Congress held in Santiago de Chile, 12-16 July 2009*

Work in progress

(please do no circulate or cite without author's consent)

I would like to hereby acknowledge and express deep gratitude to the British Academy for awarding me the Overseas Conference Grant which contributed towards my travelling expenses to attend this conference.

Abstract

In the last thirty years of his life, Leo Tolstoy wrote countless books, essays and pamphlets expounding his radical religious and political views. In these, Tolstoy expresses his deep discontent with the state, with the church, with the economy and with revolutionaries, and he formulated a strategy for change based on his understanding of Christianity. This paper argues that many of his criticisms hold as true today as they did when he penned them a century ago, and that therefore Tolstoy's political thought has not lost any of its relevance in the twenty-first century. The state – whether autocratic or democratic – continues to use violence or the threat of it to impose its will upon those who dissent from its agenda. The church continues to pay little attention to what Tolstoy sees as the clear and truly revolutionary implications of Jesus' teaching and example. A deeply unjust economic system continues to thrive on what Tolstoy saw as the unacceptable premise of private property. And many of those who suffer in this global environment understandably and yet, for Tolstoy, mistakenly continue to be attracted by violent means in an effort to improve matters. The time might have come for humanity to consider Tolstoy's alternative for society. His late political thought certainly provides an interesting angle with which to reflect on the world order, its discontent, and the dilemmas faced by those who are intent on changing it.

Jesus says, "It has been instilled into you, you have become accustomed to account it a good and reasonable thing, that you should withstand evil by force, and pluck out an eye for an eye, that you should establish courts of law, police officers, and soldiers, and that you should fight against your enemies; but I say unto you, Do no violence, take no part in violence, do evil to no one, not even to those whom you call your enemies. [...] You think that your laws correct evil; they only increase it. There is one only way of extirpating evil – the return good to all men without distinction. You have tried your principle for thousands of years; try now mine, which is the reverse."¹

-Leo Tolstoy

Leo Tolstoy was once just as famous for his novels as for the Christian anarchist critique of modern society which he formulated in the last thirty years of his life. However, after his death in 1910, decades of suppression in Russia, nationalist passions, world wars and a global recession all contributed to the gradual sidelining of his political thought.² As a result, few today are acquainted with his political writings, even though they have hardly lost any relevance with the passing of another century.

The aim of this paper is to redress that lack of attention, by first summarising Tolstoy's late political thought and then by teasing out its continued relevance in the twenty-first century. The paper is divided into three parts. The first part sets the context of Tolstoy's late political thought by clarifying its roots in Tolstoy's particular take on Christianity. The second and main part summarises and relays Tolstoy's critique of the state, of the church, of the economy and of certain revolutionaries. The third and final part then returns to each of these four critiques in order to point to their ongoing pertinence today.

1. The Christian roots of Tolstoy's thought

Tolstoy's take on Christianity was unusual.³ When he "converted" to it near his fiftieth birthday, he did not embrace the orthodox Christianity of the traditional church. For him, Jesus was no "son of God," nor did he perform any supernatural miracles. It was what Jesus taught that Tolstoy was interested in, and that, in turn, informed his own political thought.

¹ Leo Tolstoy, *What I Believe*, trans. Fyvie Mayo? (London: C. W. Daniel, 1902[?]), 41.

² An extensive review of the existing literature on Tolstoy's late political thought is available in Alexandre J. M. E. Christoyannopoulos, "Leo Tolstoy on the State: A Detailed Picture of Tolstoy's Denunciation of State Violence and Deception," *Anarchist Studies* 16/1 (2008).

³ This section consists mostly of a revised version of: Alexandre J. M. E. Christoyannopoulos, *Tolstoy the Peculiar Christian Anarchist* (Anarchy Archives), available from http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist_Archives/bright/tolstoy/chrisanar.htm (accessed 5 January 2008).

1.1. Tolstoy's "conversion"

Tolstoy only converted to Christianity late in life. He had been born in a wealthy, aristocratic family in 1828, and in the 1950s, he had gradually established himself as a respected novel writer. His two most famous works, *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, had been written between 1863 and 1869 and between 1873 and 1877 respectively. In 1869, however, Tolstoy's life started to change.

During a trip to a distant Russian province, he underwent an agonising experience of human mortality. In the middle of the night, he was seized by a sense of futility of all endeavours given that death could be the only ultimate outcome. It was not death itself that horrified him, but the fact that life seemed to have no meaning if death was guaranteed to follow. This experience haunted him ever more forcefully over the next ten years – while he was writing *Anna Karenina*. As he explains in *A Confession*, he increasingly restlessly sought the meaning of life in the great thinkers of science, religion and philosophy – all in vain.⁴ Nowhere could he find anything that gave meaning and value to life. He even contemplated suicide.

Then, some time around 1879, came the breakthrough. He observed that the peasants around him – which as a proud aristocrat he had hitherto overlooked – seemed to approach death with calm and serenity. But why? What was it that helped them remain so serene in the face of the apparent futility of life? Tolstoy realised that what they had was "faith." This intrigued Tolstoy, yet it also gave him hope. So he plunged into the Bible with renewed enthusiasm, in the hope that the meaning of life would finally be disclosed to him – and this time, it was.

1.2. The Sermon on the Mount

This revelation came to him suddenly, as he reflected on one specific and famous passage of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. This passage, Tolstoy declares in *What I Believe*, at once unlocked the whole meaning of the Bible, and with this his existential anxiety at last came to a rest.⁵ These all-important words are in Matthew 5:38-42, and read as follows:

You have heard that it was said, "Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth."

But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.

If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.

Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.⁶

For Tolstoy, the implications of these instructions were nothing short of revolutionary. Jesus was proposing a new, radical and wiser method for human beings to respond to any form of "evil." That is, when coerced or when treated unjustly, do not retaliate, but respond with love, forgiveness and generosity.

Tolstoy reflected on Jesus' advice and observed that humankind has always been caught in a vicious cycle of tit-for-tat evil and violence. Human beings constantly try to resist evil with evil, to deal violently with problems of violence, to wage war to preclude another war. But such responses succeed only in spreading

⁴ Leo Tolstoy, "A Confession," in *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*, trans. Jane Kentish (London: Penguin, 1987).

⁵ Tolstoy, *What I Believe*, 15-18.

⁶ Matthew 5:38-42. (Note that all Bible quotes in this paper are from the New International Version.)

bitterness, anger and resentment – and all that this guarantees is further evil and suffering further down the line.

The only remedy to this vicious cycle of violence, Tolstoy now realised, was to juxtapose to it the virtuous cycle of love so well articulated by Jesus. The destructive cycle of evil, anger and revenge can only be overpowered by a patient cycle of love, forgiveness and sacrifice. Turning the other cheek does mean more suffering in the short term, but the hope is that eventually, the evildoer will repent and change his ways. Just as violence is contagious, so, too, is love.

Yet as Tolstoy understood, this means that one must forego the desire to force others to behave in a certain (“better”) way. There cannot be any difference between means and ends: violence breeds further violence, and only love can eventually bring about a society bound by charity, peace and love. And love can only be taught by example. This requires courage, because even when persecuted unjustly, the follower of Christ must patiently love and forgive – even, that is, when the ultimate price to pay is death (or as in Jesus’ case, crucifixion).

That, for Tolstoy, is the essence of Jesus’ teaching to humankind. It is what Jesus taught not just in this sermon but throughout his ministry, and it is what he enacted in his very life and death. And the most eloquent summary of this rule of love and non-resistance is that beautiful passage from the Sermon on the Mount.

Some will of course say that this vision is utopian and unrealistic, but in reply to that point of view, Tolstoy writes:

It may be affirmed that the constant fulfilment of this rule is difficult, and that not every man⁷ will find his happiness in obeying it. It may be said that it is foolish; that, as unbelievers pretend, Jesus was a visionary, an idealist, whose impracticable rules were only followed because of the stupidity of his disciples. But it is impossible not to admit that Jesus did say very clearly and definitely that which he intended to say: namely, that men should not resist evil; and that therefore he who accepts his teaching cannot resist.⁸

Those *were* Jesus’ words, which he repeated in different ways and enacted again and again, and to deny that the crux of Jesus’ teaching was to call for non-resistance to (whatever gets defined as) evil is for Tolstoy, quite simply, hypocrisy.

This perspective on Jesus’ teaching formed the basis of Tolstoy’s new outlook on Christianity. He studied the Bible, attended church, and took another look at traditional church dogma. But he filtered all this new information and kept only what he considered to be in accordance with the essence of Jesus’ message. In other words, his understanding of Christianity is quite peculiar to him. Indeed, it is not without problems.

1.3. A rationalistic Christianity

Tolstoy may have been right in drawing attention to a neglected dimension of the Bible, but his interpretation of the metaphysics behind it remains unacceptable to many Christians today – in large part because in his urge to purge what he saw as a corrupted version of Jesus’ teaching, Tolstoy imposed a very rationalistic approach to Christianity, one that does away with all mysteries, rituals or traditions.

In his search for the meaning of life, Tolstoy’s only torch was the light of nineteenth century reason. If he was won over by Jesus’ message, it was because he came to believe that Jesus was simply the most rational but human teacher ever to

⁷ At this point, it is worth confessing that Tolstoy’s language is clearly male-centric: he always speaks of “men,” never – or very rarely – of “women.” This unfortunate bias cannot but be regretfully reflected in the *verbatim* quotations from him in this paper.

⁸ Tolstoy, *What I Believe*, 18-19.

have walked the planet – not some incredible “son of God” whose body was resurrected and actually flew back into heaven. Tolstoy believed that traditional mysteries such as Jesus’ divinity, Mary’s virginity, miracles and resurrections were either total nonsense or could be rationalised away, at most as helpful metaphors to convey an important (but rational, material) truth.

For him, the Bible was peppered with implausible superstitions designed to divert the reader’s attention away from the rational teachings now hidden within it. This is why Tolstoy actually rewrote the gospel (only a summary of which has been translated into English): he eliminated all irrational additives, harmonised any conflicting accounts, and rearranged Jesus’ life in a logical chronological narrative.⁹ In this gospel according to Tolstoy, there are no supernatural wonders, the light of reason features prominently, and the text ends when Jesus dies on the cross – there could be no fantastic resurrection in Tolstoy’s gospel.

Tolstoy thus reduced religion to morality, and for him the most eloquent moral code ever articulated by a human being is Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. He suspected all theological mysteries and dogmas to have been added by deceitful state or church authorities. So he warned that one must read both the Bible and theological pronouncements on it very cautiously, filtering every proposition through the invaluable test of reason.

Hence he never believed in personal life after death. What appeased his earlier existential restlessness is difficult to understand, let alone describe, because he does not actually explain it exceedingly well. But it has something to do with the realisation that there is something infinite beyond the finite, and that “faith” in this grants knowledge of the meaning of life. What that “infinite” is, however, remains obscure. It seems to be closely related to both reason and love, but this is left unclear in his writings.¹⁰

Still, the point is that he did find some sort of “meaning of life” in his rationalistic understanding of Christianity. He could now see a purpose in living, which was to strive to live up to Jesus’ teaching, to respond to all evil by overcoming it through the contagious power of love. This, he thought, would be the only way to achieve further progress in human relations.

It is also important to note that for Tolstoy, though this lesson was taught by a famous religious figure, the substance of that lesson was eminently rational. As Aylmer Maude explains of Tolstoy’s outlook, “what is essential in the Gospels derives authority not from some supernatural revelation but from its correspondence with man’s reason and conscience.”¹¹ The thinking which Tolstoy articulated based on his filtering of Christianity is therefore not limited to Christianity, because it has no less universalistic an appeal than any other judgment developed through logical reasoning. Hence Tolstoy’s Christian political thought is not just “Christian,” but is addressed to the whole of humanity.

⁹ To get to the bottom of Tolstoy’s understanding of Christianity, that gospel is well worth a read. Leo Tolstoy, “The Gospel in Brief,” in *A Confession and the Gospel in Brief*, trans. Aylmer Maude (London: Oxford University Press, 1933).

¹⁰ For what is probably his most detailed attempt at articulating the meaning of life, see Leo Tolstoy, “On Life,” in *On Life and Essays on Religion*, trans. Aylmer Maude (London: Oxford University Press, 1934).

¹¹ Aylmer Maude, “Editor’s Note,” in *On Life and Essays on Religion*, by Leo Tolstoy, trans. Aylmer Maude (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), xxviii.

2. Tolstoy's critique of society

Armed with this new understanding of Christianity and of social reality, Tolstoy developed a bitter critique of the state, the economy, the church, but also of the main revolutionary currents which sought to overhaul these. It is those four critiques that this paper now turns to.

2.1. The state

Given what he now saw as the essence of Christianity, for Tolstoy, Christians ought to reconsider the relationship they have with the state. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructed his followers not only not to resist, but also not to swear oaths (for Tolstoy, because no-one can promise to follow both divine reason and other human masters at the same time), not to judge (because none of us is pure enough to stand on high enough ground to judge others), and to love enemies (because doing so overcomes the false and destructive differentiation into nations which has befallen the human race). Yet the state demands oaths of allegiance, judges its citizens and resists both lawbreakers within and enemies without. It wages war, incarcerates people and claims absolute authority (a form of idolatry) over a given territory. Evidently, Tolstoy concludes, the state is an unchristian institution.¹²

Furthermore, if Christians actually had the courage to act as Jesus taught them to – if they governed their social interactions by love, forgiveness and charity – then there would be no need for a state. People would help one another and willingly share all of life's basic necessities. The ordering principle of society would be love, not an elusive and deluded "justice" enforced by a brutal state.

For Tolstoy, therefore, Christianity and the state are incompatible visions for society. One cannot be both an honest Christian and at the same time recognise the legitimacy of the state, both because the state directly contravenes Jesus' clear advice, and because if Jesus' recommendations were put to practice, then the state would anyway become obsolete. "Christianity in its true sense puts an end to the State," says Tolstoy, adding that "[i]t was so understood from its very beginning, and for that Christ was crucified."¹³

Nor does Tolstoy place much hope in democratic reform. In an anonymous epigraph to one of his chapters, the tone and style of which suggests the words are his, Tolstoy writes:

When among one hundred men, one rules over ninety-nine, it is unjust, it is a despotism; when ten rule over ninety, it is equally unjust, it is an oligarchy; but when fifty-one rule over forty-nine (and this is only theoretical, for in reality it is always ten or eleven of these fifty-one), it is entirely just, it is freedom!

Could there be anything funnier, in its manifest absurdity, than such reasoning? And yet it is this very reasoning that serves as the basis for all reformers of the political structure.¹⁴

Clearly, for Tolstoy, that a majority of people decide to vote one way or the other makes the decision no more "just" or "free." Nothing in democratic governance (let alone its representative variant, which is after all even further removed from the

¹² This section is only a brief summary of Tolstoy's many qualms about the state. A much more detailed outline of his views on the state is available in Christoyannopoulos, "Leo Tolstoy on the State," a copy of which can be downloaded via my website.

¹³ Leo Tolstoy, "The Kingdom of God Is within You," in *The Kingdom of God and Peace Essays*, trans. Aylmer Maude (New Delhi: Rupa, 2001), 259.

¹⁴ Leo Tolstoy, "The Law of Love and the Law of Violence," in *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*, trans. Jane Kentish (London: Penguin, 1987), 165.

theoretical ideal of truly democratic governance) guarantees a better approximation of justice simply because of its institutional setup.

Besides, whether arrived at democratically or otherwise, Tolstoy insists that "[l]aws are rules, made by people who govern by means of organised violence for non-compliance with which the non-complier is subjected to blows, to loss of liberty, or even to being murdered."¹⁵ Violence or the threat of it is the *sine qua non* of a modern state's machinery of government. Without it, its laws would be toothless. But state violence, for Tolstoy, is simply irrational:

One of two things: either people are rational beings or they are irrational beings. If they are irrational beings, then they are all irrational, and then everything among them is decided by violence, and there is no reason why certain people should, and others should not, have a *right* to use violence. In that case, governmental violence has no justification. But if men are rational beings, then their relations should be based on reason, and not on the violence of those who happen to have seized power. In that case, again, governmental violence has no justification.¹⁶

So for Tolstoy, the state's claim to a monopoly over the use of legitimate violence actually exposes its shaky foundations. Either the monopoly is unjustifiable, or any violence at all is.

As to the reasoning according to which the state's monopoly over the use of legitimate violence is necessary to prevent dog-eat-dog chaos and violence, again, Tolstoy disagrees. "Governments," he writes, "justifying their existence on the ground that they ensure a certain kind of safety to their subjects, are like the Calabrian robber-chief who collected a regular tax from all who wished to travel in safety along the highways."¹⁷ The state, for Tolstoy, is like a huge protection-racket whose very existence institutionalises the evil it claims to protect against.

And to those who argue that we have a duty to protect the weak and who ask him how he would react if a child was being attacked by madman, Tolstoy retorts:

I have never, except in discussions, encountered that fantastic brigand who before my eyes desired to kill or violate a child, but [...] I perpetually did and do see not one but millions of brigands using violence towards children and women and men and old people and all the labourers, in the name of a recognized right to do violence to their fellows.¹⁸

People worry about an if not imaginary, then at least very rare situation, and on the basis of that are quite content to see violence perpetrated every day and on a much bigger and mechanical scale as a direct result of their acceptance that violence could be necessary in extreme but hypothetical scenarios. By accepting that violence is sometimes necessary (something the efficacy of which Tolstoy anyway disputes), people grant the state the authority to use violence against millions.

Moreover, not only does the state perpetrate violence against its own citizens, but it also plunders and kills, with even less remorse, those beyond its frontiers. Of course, each state justifies the maintenance of its army as a necessary defence against ill-intentioned foreigners, but then "that is what all governments say of one another," so that in the end, "[t]he power of the State, far from saving us from attacks by our neighbours, is on the contrary itself the cause of the danger of such attacks."¹⁹ The logic is circular. And the real purpose of armies, Tolstoy anyway

¹⁵ Leo Tolstoy, "The Slavery of Our Times," in *Essays from Tula*, trans. Free Age Press (London: Sheppard, 1948), 112.

¹⁶ Tolstoy, "The Slavery of Our Times," 119 (Tolstoy's emphasis).

¹⁷ Tolstoy, "The Slavery of Our Times," 124-125.

¹⁸ Leo Tolstoy, "Introduction to a Short Biography of William Lloyd Garrison," in *The Kingdom of God and Peace Essays*, trans. Aylmer Maude (New Delhi: Rupa, 2001), 534.

¹⁹ Tolstoy, "The Kingdom of God Is within You," 199.

suspects, was accurately insinuated by Lichtenberg when he wrote that "[i]f a traveller were to see a people on some far-off island whose houses were protected by loaded cannon and around those sentinels patrolled night and day, he could not help thinking that the island was inhabited by brigands. Is it not thus with the European states?"²⁰ Armies, this argument goes, are there to patrol borders which are erected to protect undue wealth which was often plundered from abroad.

In short, Tolstoy was an anarchist because he could not accept state violence and the arguments that justify it. For him, the state is a violent bully the existence of which is an insult to reason (and Christianity). Yet it does exist, and it maintains itself by deceiving people into accepting its necessity. A crucial helper in that deception, in Tolstoy's view, has often been the church.

2.2. The church

One might indeed wonder, given Jesus' teaching and given the state's record, why so many Christians are quite happy to owe and defend their allegiance to the state. For Tolstoy, the reason for this is clear: ever since Emperor Constantine, the official church has betrayed Christianity by hypocritically cuddling with state power. Tolstoy is therefore just as scathing of the church as of the state. He accuses church and state authorities of conspiring to maintain their hold on power by perpetuating a cunning mix of irrational lies and legitimised violence to keep "Christians" hypnotised into submission.

In fact, for Tolstoy, most of the creeds professed by the church are irrational, if not plainly wrong. He is particularly dismissive of the various ways through which church theologians reduce the importance of the Jesus' most radical commandments (especially non-resistance to evil). He also has no time for the alleged infallibility of the church and of the Bible. The latter, for him, is just a collection of writings from very different authors cobbled together and tinkered with time and time again, and certainly no perfect, indivisible or infallible revelation.

But if church creeds are so irrational, Tolstoy had to explain why the church has been so successful in nevertheless convincing so many of their validity. He does so by putting the blame on cunning tools of mental trickery that he accused the church of using, including: the notion that miracles provide proof of church creeds; the diverting of attention away from the essence of Christianity by focusing on external worship; the deliberate mixing of truths with falsehoods in order to drown the former in the latter; and the way in which all these combine to stifle reason and basically amount to carefully planned hypnotism.

Given his analysis, Tolstoy was bound to conclude that the church is a wicked organisation. For him, while the spirit of the very early church remained close to the aims of Jesus, the church then gradually degenerated such that by the time of Constantine and certainly a couple of generations after him, it had become the very opposite of what it was supposed to be – he even calls it the Antichrist.²¹ Tolstoy does not hesitate to accuse the clergy of being a gathering of self-righteous hypocrites whose teaching is now deprived of any decent moral guidance. Predictably, publicising such bitter views on the church led to his public excommunication from

²⁰ Leo Tolstoy, "Bethink Yourselves!," in *Recollections and Essays*, trans. Aylmer Maude (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), 253.

²¹ He narrates this degeneration very tellingly in a fictional conversation between the devil and his demons in Leo Tolstoy, "The Restoration of Hell," in *On Life and Essays on Religion*, trans. Aylmer Maude (London: Oxford University Press, 1934).

the Russian Orthodox congregation, but that only reinforced Tolstoy's belief that one must inevitably choose between, on the one hand, Jesus and his Sermon on the Mount, and on the other, the church and her irrational and hypnotic creeds.

To sum up, if Tolstoy uses strong language against the church, it is because he considers it to have betrayed Jesus' teaching by choosing to focus on rituals and superstitions rather than on the central message summarised in the Sermon on the Mount. For him, the behaviour of both church and state runs counter to Jesus' teaching, and they are therefore both unchristian institutions which are bound to become obsolete in a truly Christian society. He is convinced that an honest and full application of Christianity can only lead to a stateless and churchless society.

2.3. The economy

Tolstoy is also very critical of the economic system which drives modern capitalist societies. He sees it as fundamentally unjust, indeed as barely different from chattel slavery. He writes:

If the slave-owner of our time has not slave John, whom he can send to the cess-pool to clear out his excrements, he has five shillings of which hundreds of Johns are in such need that the slave-owner of our times may choose anyone out of hundreds of Johns and be a benefactor to him by giving him the preference, and allowing him, rather than another, to climb down into the cess-pool.²²

The slave of the capitalist system may not be led to degrading work by the threat of a whip, but he will quite "willingly" volunteer for such work since that is the only way in which he can gather enough money to survive and feed his relatives. The work is no less degrading, and the worker is no less keen to do it. The only difference with chattel slavery is in the way by which the worker is compelled to take on such work.

What lies at the root of this injustice, according to Tolstoy, is that "one way or the other, the labourer is always in slavery to those who control the taxes, the land, and the articles necessary to satisfy his requirements."²³ By extension, the culprit is private property. In one of his texts, he even goes as far as to claim that "property is the root of all evil," not only because it is at the basis of an asymmetric and unjust system, but also because it generates greed, covetousness and a concomitant moral depravity among both the haves and the have-nots.²⁴

On this subject, therefore, Tolstoy's thought is not that different from that of many other thinkers on the Left. However, he disliked the scientific air around his Marxist contemporaries, so one often finds him criticising fellow leftists rather than approving of them. There is one thinker he does sympathise with quite strongly, but that thinker is also one whose thought has tended to be forgotten today. His name is Henry George, and his political thought is, like Tolstoy's, informed by his Christian outlook. He is also a vehement critic of private property, because for him all land was a gift of God to all humanity. But his main (and very radical) recommendation for modern society is the abolition of all taxes and their replacement by a single tax on based the value of land – something the administration of which would still require the continuing operation of a state. Tolstoy did advocate Georgist reform to his contemporaries (and in his third and final main novel, *Resurrection*, which he wrote after his conversion), but as Maude remarks, he did so "only by way of a concession to humanity's weakness."²⁵ For Tolstoy, George's proposals for economic reform

²² Tolstoy, "The Slavery of Our Times," 95.

²³ Tolstoy, "The Slavery of Our Times," 100.

²⁴ Lyof N. Tolstoi, *What to Do?* (London: Walter Scott), 228.

²⁵ Aylmer Maude, *The Life of Tolstoy: Later Years* (London: Oxford University Press, 1930), 429.

were a massive step in the right direction, but ultimately, they were only a step, and the more important and necessary change would be the abolition of the state, not least because it underwrites a deeply unjust system of economic relations.

2.4. Revolutionaries

This leads to the question of method, of the means through which the state would have to be abolished. And here again, Tolstoy dissented from much common opinion. In an age of revolutionary turmoil (not least in his homeland), Tolstoy was often driven to forewarn that violent methods will only lead to more violence, and that therefore revolutionaries must uncompromisingly forego the use of violence lest they only instigate just a new, different but equally unjust dictatorship.

Tolstoy understands the appeal of violence, nurtured as it is by a deep frustration against the cunning and resilience of the system. Besides, violent revolutionaries only employ the methods they have been “taught” by. But adopting violent revolutionary means, he predicts, will only justify counter-revolutionary violence in response. Surely, Tolstoy pleads, revolutionaries must be capable of devising “better means of improving the conditions of humanity than by killing people whose destruction can be of no more use than the decapitation of that mythical monster on whose neck a new head appeared as soon as one was cut off?”²⁶

This also led him to distance himself from other anarchists, whom he, along with many of his contemporaries, could not dissociate from bomb-throwing, regicides, and other similar forms of violence. He agreed with much of their analysis, but not with the use of violence: “[t]he Anarchists,” he said, “are right in everything; in the negation of the existing order, and in the assertion that, without Authority, there could not be worse violence than that of Authority under existing conditions. They are mistaken only in thinking that Anarchy can be instituted by a [violent] revolution.”²⁷

For Tolstoy, the only truly revolutionary method was the one articulated by Jesus, and its “essence [...] lies in substituting an inward aim (to attain which no one else's consent is necessary) in place of external aims (to attain which everyone's consent is necessary).”²⁸ The only true revolution, therefore, must be led by example. It must start within us, by a change of heart which leads to the adoption of more loving and forgiving behaviour. In turn, our example might then inspire others to follow it and do the same. Tolstoy had faith in the contagious power of such inner transformation, as the following quote demonstrates (note that what Tolstoy here calls the “social conception of life” is the present state of organised violence):

Men in their present condition are like a swarm of bees hanging from a branch in a cluster. The position of the bees on that branch is temporary and must inevitably be changed. They must bestir themselves and find a new dwelling. Each of the bees knows this and wishes to change its position and that of others, but no one of them is willing to move till the rest do so. [...] It would seem that there was no way out of this state for the bees, just as there seems no escape for worldly men who are entangled in the toils of the social conception of life. [...] Yet as it is enough for one bee to spread her wings, rise up and fly away, and a second, a third, a tenth, and a hundredth, will do the same and the cluster that hung inertly becomes a freely flying swarm of bees; so let but one man understand life as Christianity teaches us to understand it, and begin to live

²⁶ Leo Tolstoy, “Thou Shalt Not Kill,” in *Recollections and Essays*, trans. Aylmer Maude (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), 197.

²⁷ Leo Tolstoy, “On Anarchy,” in *Government Is Violence: Essays on Anarchism and Pacifism*, ed. David Stephens, trans. Vladimir Tchertkoff (London: Phoenix, 1990), 68.

²⁸ Tolstoy, “The Kingdom of God Is within You,” 413.

accordingly, and a second, a third, and a hundredth will do the same, till the enchanted circle of social life from which there seemed to be no escape will be destroyed.²⁹

Tolstoy hoped that the adoption of Jesus' revolutionary method by a courageous few might eventually trigger the dawning of his vision for society.

For the last thirty years of his life, Tolstoy tirelessly wrote dozens of books, articles and pamphlets on religion and politics in the hope that such enterprise could contribute towards awakening his fellow Christians to the true essence of Christianity. His virulent criticisms of both state and church authorities led him to be frequently censored, but his writings were published abroad and circulated both in Russia and around the world. His fellow Russians respected him for standing up to the Tsar, but he also received plenty of letters (including from Gandhi, who openly acknowledged his debt to Tolstoy)³⁰ and visits from abroad by people inquiring about his political interpretation of Christianity. So he became an important international figure at the turn of the century, even though today, we only really remember him for the novels he wrote before he "converted" to Christianity.

3. Tolstoy's contemporary relevance

Tolstoy articulated his Christian anarchist political thought between 1880 and 1910, yet its continuing relevance should have become fairly self-evident already. To tease it out a little further, this section briefly returns to each of the four subjects of his critique, in the same order.

3.1. The state

The state is no less violent today that it was a century ago. Its twentieth century record is after all tainted with gallons of blood. It continues to justify its existence as the guarantor of peace and security, yet wars continue to be waged – in the name of this or that liberation, this or that civilising mission (e.g. spreading democracy), or this or that right to self-defence – and violence continues to be used against those found in breach of its domestic laws – including those so destitute they resort to crime, those so hopeless they cross borders to gain a living, and those campaigning for a different world.³¹

Representative democracy has spread across the globe, yet minorities continue to be ruled by majorities, and the delusion which identifies justice with the

²⁹ Tolstoy, "The Kingdom of God Is within You," 234-235.

³⁰ On Tolstoy's influence on Gandhi (and their differences), see Christian Bartolf, "Tolstoy's Legacy for Mankind: A Manifesto for Nonviolence," paper presented at *Second International Conference on Tolstoy and World Literature*, Yasnaya Polyana and Tula, 12-28 August 2000, available from <http://www.fredsakademiet.dk/library/tolstoj/tolstoy.htm> (accessed 5 November 2006), introduction and section 2; Peter Brock, *Pacifism in Europe to 1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 468-469; A. L. Herman, "Satyagraha: A New Indian Word for Some Old Ways of Western Thinking," *Philosophy East and West* 19/2 (1969); Janko Lavrin, "Tolstoy and Gandhi," *Russian Review* 19/2 (1960); Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (London: Fontana, 1993), 422-427; Geoffrey Ostergaard, *Resisting the Nation State: The Pacifist and Anarchist Tradition* (Peace Pledge Union), available from http://www.ppu.org.uk/e_publications/dd-trad1.html (accessed 8 August 2007), section 13.

³¹ And on Tolstoy's continued relevance even in the "war" against the very different phenomenon of terrorism, see: Alexandre J. M. E. Christoyannopoulos, "Turning the Other Cheek to Terrorism: Reflections on the Contemporary Significance of Leo Tolstoy's Exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount," *Politics and Religion* 1/1 (2008).

will of a majority survives. Besides, Tolstoy's passing remark about the much smaller size of the group that actually does influence governmental decision-making holds no less true today than then.

The twenty-first century state does look different: it is bigger, it has depersonalised and institutionalised various functions of government even further, and its actions are reported much faster in the public domain. But none of this has made it less violent or less unchristian. If anything, it has developed into a self-affirming, omniscient, omnipotent machine to a much more worrying extent than in Tolstoy's era.

Of course, Tolstoy is not alone in drawing attention to all this. The anarchist school of thought, for instance, has also been voicing similar concerns for nearly two centuries.³² But Tolstoy's voice adds to its chorus, its originality being in his fundamentalist rejection of violence as well as in his Christian grounding.

3.2. The church

On this particular Christian grounding, Tolstoy again is not alone. Other Christian anarchists like Jacques Ellul, Vernard Eller, Dave Andrews and those associated with the *Catholic Worker* movement also belong to a Christian strand of anarchism.³³ Where Tolstoy is quite unique among them is in his very rationalistic take on Christianity.

Such a view of Christianity, however, is not completely unheard of. Many have been disillusioned by what is often called "institutional religion" and have chosen to hear and take from Christianity what they see as its worthy core. Thus many find inspiration in Jesus' teachings without necessarily respecting the church. Indeed, many Europeans will happily express respect for Jesus alongside a strong resentment of the church. Such anticlericalism is arguably even more popular nowadays than when in Tolstoy's time.

That said, the church has lost much of the power and status it held even as close as a century ago. The states that rely on it and elevate it seem fewer than in Tolstoy's time. Then again, state and church are rarely fully separated. Whether it be because the subsistence of the clergy is funded by the state, because the Christian heritage forms integral part of national identity, because the two institutions and its personnel overlap, or because the symbols of one are present in the other, the love

³² Good introductions to anarchism include: Ruth Kinna, *Anarchism: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005); Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible*; George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975); George Woodcock, ed., *The Anarchist Reader* (Glasgow: Collins, 1977).

³³ See, for instance: Dave Andrews, *Christi-Anarchy: Discovering a Radical Spirituality of Compassion* (Oxford: Lion, 1999); Dave Andrews, *Not Religion, but Love: Practicing a Radical Spirituality of Compassion* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2001); Patrick G. Coy, ed., *A Revolution of the Heart: Essays on the Catholic Worker* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of the Legendary Catholic Social Activist* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1952); Vernard Eller, *Christian Anarchy: Jesus' Primacy over the Powers* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1987); Jacques Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, trans. George W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991); Ammon Hennacy, *The Book of Ammon*, ed. Jim Missey and Joan Thomas, Second ed. (Baltimore: Fortkamp, 1994); Peter Maurin, *Easy Essays* (Washington: Rose Hill, 2003). For a more general introduction to Christian anarchism, see: Alexandre J. M. E. Christoyannopoulos, *Christian Anarchism: A Political Commentary on the Gospel* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010); Alexandre J. M. E. Christoyannopoulos, "Christian Anarchism: A Revolutionary Reading of the Bible," in *New Perspectives on Anarchism*, ed. Nathan Jun and Shane Wahl (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).

affair between state and church continues. Indeed, church theologians continue to cite many of the arguments cited by Tolstoy to justify their submission to the state.

In short, Today's churches are not so dissimilar from the ones Tolstoy criticised. Nor has the church reconsidered the Christian dogma which Tolstoy had so little time for. What he had to say then, therefore, he would probably repeat just as forcefully today. And in today's Europe, at least, it may well be that more people than then would find his views about the church to be resonating with theirs.

3.3. The economy

On the economy, what Tolstoy saw as the slavery inherent in the system is no different today – other perhaps than that the system has become so globalised that a huge distance now helps hide today's slave in the South from the shareholders of his employers in the North.

Private property, for its part, continues mostly unchallenged – it is after all at the very basis of the capitalist economy, to the point that even a global crisis of unprecedented proportions has only led to a frenetic rush to cure the symptoms and not to a serious, open and engaged reconsideration of possible fundamental causes. What has changed since Tolstoy is that a communist experiment was tried in many places, and almost everywhere failed. Tolstoy, however, would have never approved of the sort of central planning and totalitarian state which characterised many communist experiments. Indeed he warned against it and predicted just another dictatorship.

In any case, here again, on the economy, Tolstoy's critique is not unique to him. Many thinkers on the Left, including many anarchists, have made similar points. Yet the continuing presence of these perspectives on the economy, if anything, attests to the continuing pertinence of Tolstoy's views on it, too.

3.4. Revolutionaries

Where Tolstoy's contribution remains fairly unique, perhaps indeed where it is most timely and refreshing, is in his warnings about the adoption of violence to further any revolutionary cause, and in his intransigent advocacy of non-violence and teaching by example. Gandhi demonstrated the potency of non-violent sacrifice as a revolutionary method. Many have been inspired to follow him since. But it remains the case that most people will happily concede to the need to use violence sometimes – and especially to change what is seen as a deeply unjust political and economic system.

Few people commit evil willingly, or at least most rationalise away the evil they do commit as the collateral damage from means which are justified by the end that is pursued. Tolstoy's thought is a warning against this logic. It warns that means become ends, that ends are lost if violent means are adopted. In an age of globalising discontent, Tolstoy warns against the adoption of violence to express that discontent. In so doing, Tolstoy's voice, and through him that of Jesus, rings like that of a prophet denouncing humanity's present condition and cautioning it about the perilous path ahead. Given the seriousness of both his diagnosis and prognosis, such a prophetic voice is surely worth paying more attention to.

Concluding thoughts

Tolstoy's version of Christianity will be uncomfortable to those who sincerely believe that divine mysteries can only be revealed through patient contemplation and diligent ritual. And critics could well be right in being weary of Tolstoy's extreme, almost fundamentalist interpretation of Christianity. Yet Tolstoy's contribution to political thought remains valuable in that he brings attention to the radical political implications of the Sermon on the Mount, and in that while reflecting on that, he articulates a number of valuable critiques of the state, the church, the economy and of revolutionary methods. Besides, what he wrote on the topic, he wrote well and he wrote at length. His interpretation of Christianity may have been peculiar indeed, but his work makes him an eminent, arguably prophetic voice in the broad and diverse orchestra of political theory, a voice whose timbre has (unfortunately) lost no resonance in the unfolding twenty-first century.

Bibliography

Recommended volumes of Tolstoy's late political thought

- Tolstoy, Leo. *On Civil Disobedience and Non-Violence*. New York: Bergman, 1967.
- . *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*. Translated by Jane Kentish. London: Penguin, 1987.
- . *A Confession and the Gospel in Brief*. Translated by Aylmer Maude. London: Humphrey Milford, 1933.
- . *Essays from Tula*. [Translated by Free Age Press.] London: Sheppard, 1948.
- . *Government is Violence: Essays on Anarchism and Pacifism*. Edited by David Stephens. London: Phoenix, 1990.
- . *The Kingdom of God and Peace Essays*. Translated by Aylmer Maude. New Delhi: Rupa, 2001.
- . *On Life and Essays on Religion*. Translated by Aylmer Maude. London: Humphrey Milford, 1934.
- . *What I Believe*. [Translated by Fyvie Mayo?] London: C. W. Daniel, n.d.

List of references

- Andrews, Dave. *Christi-Anarchy: Discovering a Radical Spirituality of Compassion*. Oxford: Lion, 1999.
- . *Not Religion, but Love: Practicing a Radical Spirituality of Compassion*. Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2001.
- Bartolf, Christian. "Tolstoy's Legacy for Mankind: A Manifesto for Nonviolence." Paper presented at *Second International Conference on Tolstoy and World Literature*, Yasnaya Polyana and Tula, 12-28 August 2000. Available from <http://www.fredsakademiet.dk/library/tolstoj/tolstoy.htm> (accessed 5 November 2006).
- Brock, Peter. *Pacifism in Europe to 1914*. Vol. 1, *A History of Pacifism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972.
- Christoyannopoulos, Alexandre J. M. E. *Christian Anarchism: A Political Commentary on the Gospel*. Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010.
- . "Christian Anarchism: A Revolutionary Reading of the Bible." In *New Perspectives on Anarchism*, edited by Nathan Jun and Shane Wahl: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009.
- . "Leo Tolstoy on the State: A Detailed Picture of Tolstoy's Denunciation of State Violence and Deception." *Anarchist Studies* 16/1 (2008): 20-47.
- . *Tolstoy the Peculiar Christian Anarchist*. Anarchy Archives, 2007. Available from http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist_Archives/bright/tolstoy/chrisanar.htm (accessed 5 January 2008).
- . "Turning the Other Cheek to Terrorism: Reflections on the Contemporary Significance of Leo Tolstoy's Exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount." *Politics and Religion* 1/1 (April 2008): 27-54.
- Coy, Patrick G., ed. *A Revolution of the Heart: Essays on the Catholic Worker*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988.
- Day, Dorothy. *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of the Legendary Catholic Social Activist*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1952.
- Eller, Vernard. *Christian Anarchy: Jesus' Primacy over the Powers*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1987.
- Ellul, Jacques. *Anarchy and Christianity*. Translated by George W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991.
- Hennacy, Ammon. *The Book of Ammon*. Edited by Jim Missey and Joan Thomas. Second edition. Baltimore: Fortkamp, 1994.

- Herman, A. L. "Satyagraha: A New Indian Word for Some Old Ways of Western Thinking." *Philosophy East and West* 19/2 (April 1969): 123-142.
- Kinna, Ruth. *Anarchism: A Beginner's Guide*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2005.
- Lavrin, Janko. "Tolstoy and Gandhi." *Russian Review* 19/2 (April 1960): 132-139.
- Marshall, Peter. *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism*. London: Fontana, 1993.
- Maude, Aylmer. "Editor's Note." In *On Life and Essays on Religion*, by Leo Tolstoy, translated by Aylmer Maude. Vol. 12, *Tolstoy Centenary Edition*. London: Oxford University Press, 1934.
- . *The Life of Tolstoy: Later Years*. Vol. 2, *Tolstoy Centenary Edition*. London: Oxford University Press, 1930.
- Maurin, Peter. *Easy Essays*. Washington: Rose Hill, 2003.
- Ostergaard, Geoffrey. *Resisting the Nation State: The Pacifist and Anarchist Tradition*. Peace Pledge Union. Available from http://www.ppu.org.uk/e_publications/dd-trad1.html (accessed 8 August 2007).
- Tolstoï, Lyof N. *What to Do?* London: Walter Scott.
- Tolstoy, Leo. "Bethink Yourselves!" In *Recollections and Essays*, translated by Aylmer Maude, 204-271. Vol. 21, *Tolstoy Centenary Edition*. London: Oxford University Press, 1937.
- . "A Confession." In *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*, translated by Jane Kentish, 17-80. London: Penguin, 1987.
- . "The Gospel in Brief." In *A Confession and the Gospel in Brief*, translated by Aylmer Maude, 113-302. Vol. 11, *Tolstoy Centenary Edition*. London: Oxford University Press, 1933.
- . "Introduction to a Short Biography of William Lloyd Garrison." In *The Kingdom of God and Peace Essays*, translated by Aylmer Maude, 530-536. New Delhi: Rupa, 2001.
- . "The Kingdom of God Is within You." In *The Kingdom of God and Peace Essays*, translated by Aylmer Maude, 1-421. New Delhi: Rupa, 2001.
- . "The Law of Love and the Law of Violence." In *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*, translated by Jane Kentish, 151-230. London: Penguin, 1987.
- . "On Anarchy." In *Government Is Violence: Essays on Anarchism and Pacifism*, edited by David Stephens, translated by Vladimir Tchertkoff, 67-70. London: Phoenix, 1990.
- . "On Life." In *On Life and Essays on Religion*, translated by Aylmer Maude, 1-167. Vol. 12, *Tolstoy Centenary Edition*. London: Oxford University Press, 1934.
- . "The Restoration of Hell." In *On Life and Essays on Religion*, translated by Aylmer Maude, 309-330. Vol. 12, *Tolstoy Centenary Edition*. London: Oxford University Press, 1934.
- . "The Slavery of Our Times." In *Essays from Tula*, translated by Free Age Press, 65-136. London: Sheppard, 1948.
- . "Thou Shalt Not Kill." In *Recollections and Essays*, translated by Aylmer Maude, 195-203. Vol. 21, *Tolstoy Centenary Edition*. London: Oxford University Press, 1937.
- . *What I Believe*. Translated by Fyvie Mayo? London: C. W. Daniel, 1902[?].
- Woodcock, George. *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975.
- , ed. *The Anarchist Reader*. Glasgow: Collins, 1977.