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‘Bethink Yourselves or You Will Perish’: Leo Tolstoy’s Voice a Centenary after His Death

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When Leo Tolstoy died in November 1910, he was just as famous for his radical political and religious writings as he was for his fictional literature. Yet during the hundred years that have passed since, his Christian anarchist voice has been drowned by the sort of historical forces he had always been so eager to make sense of. Today, only few of even those acquainted with his literature know much about his unusual and radical religious and political writings (other perhaps than that they were unusual, radical, religious and political). What he has to say to Christians, to anarchists and indeed to the wider public, however, is just as urgent today as it was at the time of writing. In this testimonial to mark the centenary of his death, therefore, I wish to first provide a brief story of what happened to Tolstoy’s voice, and then to hint at the importance of the sort of contributions he can make to a number of vital challenges facing us today.

1. Tolstoy’s Drowning Voice since 1910

Following a very long and tormenting existential crisis, Tolstoy came to the conclusion, while reading the gospels, that violence (for a number of reasons) cannot but be evil, that the only way to prevent such evil is *never* to use violence ourselves, and that therefore all the institutions that use or endorse violence have to be exposed as evil and have to be rendered obsolete. He obviously derived a number of further

implications from this core of his new social vision which, though too complex to be examined here,² caused him to spend the last thirty years of his life tirelessly articulating his view and trying to convince the wider public of its rationale.

Tolstoy addressed his Christian anarchist message to many sections of society, often through letters and essays, but also books, plays and novels. His epistolary appeal to the Tsar fell on deaf ears;³ his open appeal to the clergy eventually led to excommunication;⁴ and his various appeals to social reformers and revolutionaries were received as utopian distractions from more pressing concerns.⁵ In the wider Russian, European and global public, however, many were inspired by his cause and admired his dedication to it. He received countless letters and visits and carefully answered all the queries sent to him about his teaching.⁶ Some admirers went on to set up Tolstoyan communes across Europe and beyond, others made up their mind to become conscientious objectors, and many agreed with Tolstoy's penetrating verbal demolition of the Russian order.⁷ His voice, however, would not be heard for long – for a number of reasons.

With the Great War and the Bolshevik Revolution – two colossal outbursts of violence Tolstoy had been so anxious for humanity to avoid – the world and especially Russia became engulfed in such turmoil that his voice was drowned by the louder and more numerous ones calling for violence, war and revolution. Patriotism, universal military conscription, stupefying church-state rituals and dogma, along with the coercive force of the state apparatus – all phenomena which Tolstoy had spent decades denouncing – all contributed to shifting the focus away from his radical vision to the seemingly more urgent matters for which violent resistance was surely 'necessary.'

Aside from the overwhelming effect of this broader political turmoil, there were also very deliberate efforts to mute Tolstoy's voice and followers. In Stalin's Russia, Tolstoy was depicted as a brilliant illustrator of the Russian peasantry and aristocracy but one whose late political writings could be swept aside as the mad ramblings of a foolish eccentric. His followers were increasingly persecuted, sent to prison, exiled to Siberia or simply exterminated.⁸ Meanwhile the rest of Europe was busy with a huge economic crisis, clashing ideologies, and mounting nationalist passions and military tensions that reached their climax in 1939. The ensuing Cold War framed post-war ideological options in a Manichean binary that neatly kept views like Tolstoy's safely at bay. In other words, Tolstoy's voice would always struggle to be heard in the twentieth century.

Yet Tolstoy's message was not completely lost. Mohandes Gandhi picked up an essential part of it.⁹ Gandhi was no anarchist, but he admired and was directly inspired by Tolstoy's condemnation and strict rejection of violence. In so doing, he demonstrated one of the most potent aspects of Tolstoy's Christian anarchism: its 'universal' or not-specifically-*Christian* appeal. That is, although Tolstoy's Christian anarchism was nominally 'Christian' because it was from Jesus that it drew its rejection of violence and (hence) the state, Jesus for Tolstoy was not a divine but simply a *rational* teacher. Tolstoy believed that what he preached was not particularly Christian but reasonable, and thus intelligible to all. In short, he took Jesus' teaching on love and violence out of its Christian casing and couched it in the 'universal' language of reason, where non-Christians (like Gandhi) could also hear it.¹⁰

When anarchism and pacifism enjoyed a revival in the 1960s, more people re-discovered Tolstoy and drew inspiration from him. Christian anarchist and other radical leftist Christian ideas inspired a few to set up movements and communities

and to participate in anti-war demonstrations and non-violent direct action.¹¹ But generally speaking, Tolstoy's ideas were not studied in systematic detail. Even in Liberation Theology, one struggles to find much engagement with Christian anarchist thought.

Tolstoy had been largely ignored during his lifetime, and the political events that unfolded after his death along with direct persecution drowned his voice even further. No surprise, then, that despite Tolstoy's enduring fame as a novelist, his political views remain understudied and his writings do not feature on relevant reading lists – despite their continued urgency and relevance.

2. The Continuing Urgency of Tolstoy's Christian Anarchism

Details of Tolstoy's radical political thought have been expounded in previous issues of this journal.¹² A centenary after his death, though, it might be worth recalling why his writings should be studied by Christians, by anarchists, as well as by the wider human community.

One could argue that Tolstoy was not really a Christian. He did not go to church, did not believe in key church dogmas, and did not see Jesus as anything more than a rational but normal human being. Yet in stubbornly refusing to turn the spotlight away from what is after all a central aspect of Jesus' teaching and example, he challenged self-proclaimed Christians to examine the content of their professed faith. Highlighting their frequent failure to follow the radical political side of Jesus' teaching, Tolstoy accused Christians of the same hypocrisy that Jesus condemned in religious groups of his own time. For Tolstoy, only if they embraced Jesus' anarchism could Christians portray themselves as the shining example of the sort of community or 'church' that Jesus had called his followers to. In short, with his detailed and

moving exegesis of the gospels, Tolstoy confronted Christians with a choice – and that is as relevant today as it was in his own lifetime.¹³

Tolstoy also offers a critique of institutionalised Christianity that has lost little relevance a century on. It may be that people are less religious than they were in the late nineteenth century, but the religious institutions he was denouncing live on, as do their unhealthy ties to the state. That distrust of institutional religion is wider today only lends credence to Tolstoy's critique, and his bitter anticlericalism might appease secular anarchists' unease at the 'Christian' epithet to Tolstoy's anarchism. Either way, Tolstoy's numerous complaints about institutionalised churches are just as good a read today as they must have been then.¹⁴

Turning to Tolstoy's message to the anarchist movement, again, little of what he wrote is less pertinent today than a century back. Once he was better informed about anarchism, Tolstoy was happy to declare that he agreed with anarchism on just about everything – except, of course, violence.¹⁵ For Tolstoy, violence is simply always wrong, hurtful, counter-productive, deluded. A good end never justifies violent means, because means take over and obscure the ends. Foregoing violence is certainly not easy. It requires courage (and indeed hope that it can work), but for Tolstoy it is the only way to succeed in building an alternative society.

This pacifist position is of course shared by many in the anarchist movement (and can also be foundational to their rejection of the state) too, but many anarchists still counsel violence, however reluctantly, as a necessary method to further their revolutionary cause. Tolstoy – who had a sympathetic view of revolutionaries – warns this will neither convert the doubters nor succeed in abolishing oppressive structures, and will provide political authorities with the anger and justification to repress the advocates of political alternatives whose voices are so important today. The negative

consequences of violence outweigh any positive impact, whereas non-violence, whose positive impact is admittedly less forceful, immediate or even certain, at least avoids alienating the public and feeding the flames of institutional anger. To the broader anarchist movement, therefore, Tolstoy offers a compelling contribution to the debate on revolutionary means, a debate which is arguably central to anarchism's hopes for success.¹⁶

Finally, today just as in his lifetime, the message Tolstoy addresses to the public beyond Christians and anarchists, and especially to aristocrats and other middle- or upper-class elites, has again lost neither pertinence nor potency. In detail, clearly and eloquently, Tolstoy denounces capitalism and private property as wage slavery;¹⁷ state violence as illegitimate, exploitative and brutal in its scale and administrative coldness;¹⁸ patriotism as a hypnotic tool that distorts a natural enough feeling of kinship for all human beings into a galvaniser of support for killing and stealing on an international scale;¹⁹ arms races, 'peace' conferences and international alliances as blatantly hypocritical geopolitical manoeuvres in preparation for the next war;²⁰ and any church support of the state as a clear, greedy and tragic betrayal of Jesus' teaching and example.²¹ Reading Tolstoy on any of these topics cannot leave many unmoved by the aesthetic and intellectual force of his analysis. Tolstoy has a lot to say about today's world, and what he says about it, he says well.

In an unfolding twenty-first century which promises ecological doom and economic crises on an unknown scale, the usual social deprivation and political oppression, an increasingly unstable international order and probably more domestic unrest, it is perhaps even more important than a century ago that Tolstoy's prophetic critique is heard and seriously considered. Tolstoy's concern with these writings was always to stir people out of their hypnotic acceptance of a violent, unjust and suicidal

world, to see the true potential of a non-violent anarchist alternative, and to encourage them to if not work for it at least stop being complicit in making it seem impossible.

Tolstoy was at pains to draw attention to the true, violent nature of the current order because he felt that the simple recognition of the truth of this diagnosis would inevitably compel his readers to follow the same logical journey to the conclusions that he reached. ‘Bethink yourselves,’ he argued, and by the mere realisation of the truth you will inevitably act differently.²² The aim of his political writings was to awaken humanity and save it by converting it to a mode of living that would be based on love and not violence. Tolstoy died of pneumonia in Astapovo train station while trying to escape to a monastery to find peace and rest from his tumultuous surroundings. If his message is not heard, humanity may also face extinction before it ever reaches the just and loving society so many of its prophets have been calling it to.

¹ The author wishes to thank Fanny Forest, Ruth Kinna and Terry Hopton for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article. The quoted words in the title are paraphrased from Leo Tolstoy, ‘The Kingdom of God Is within You’, in *The Kingdom of God and Peace Essays*, trans. Aylmer Maude (New Delhi: Rupa, 2001), 398.

² See Alexandre Christoyannopoulos, ‘Leo Tolstoy on the State: A Detailed Picture of Tolstoy’s Denunciation of State Violence and Deception’, *Anarchist Studies* 16/1 (2008); Terry Hopton, ‘Tolstoy, God and Anarchism’, *Anarchist Studies* 8 (2000). No English book-length study of Tolstoy’s Christian anarchism exists to this day, but I am currently working on one.

³ Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (London: Fontana, 1993), 378.

⁴ Leo Tolstoy, ‘A Reply to the Synod’s Edict of Excommunication, and to Letters Received by Me Concerning It’, and ‘An Appeal to the Clergy’, both in *On Life and Essays on Religion*, trans. Aylmer Maude (London: Oxford University Press, 1934).

⁵ Leo Tolstoy, 'An Appeal to Social Reformers', and 'On Socialism, State and Christian', in *Government Is Violence: Essays on Anarchism and Pacifism*, ed. David Stephens, trans. Vladimir Tchertkoff (London: Phoenix, 1990); Leo Tolstoy, 'I Cannot Be Silent', 'Thou Shalt Not Kill', and 'What's to Be Done?', all in *Recollections and Essays*, trans. Aylmer Maude (London: Oxford University Press, 1937).

⁶ Peter Brock, *Pacifism in Europe to 1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972); George Kennan, 'A Visit to Count Tolstoi', *The Century Magazine* 34/2 (1887); Rene Fuegoep-Miller, 'Tolstoy the Apostolic Crusader', *Russian Review* 19/2 (1960); Leo Tolstoy, 'Gandhi Letters', in Maude, *Recollections and Essays*.

⁷ Brock, *Pacifism in Europe to 1914*, 442-470; Alexandre Christoyannopoulos, *Christian Anarchism: A Political Commentary on the Gospel* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010), 254-258; George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975).

⁸ Paul Avrich, 'Russian Anarchists and the Civil War', *Russian Review* 27/3 (1968); Brock, *Pacifism in Europe to 1914*; Cory Bushman, 'A Brief History of Peasant Tolstoyans', *The Mormon Worker*, issue 2, January 2008, available from http://www.themormonworker.org/articles/issue2/a_brief_history_of_peasant_tolstoyants.php [accessed 2 May 2008].

⁹ Janko Lavrin, 'Tolstoy and Gandhi', *Russian Review* 19/2 (1960).

¹⁰ Brock, *Pacifism in Europe to 1914*; 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].

¹¹ Brock, *Pacifism in Europe to 1914*; Ammon Hennacy, *The Book of Ammon*, ed. Jim Missey and Joan Thomas, Second ed. (Baltimore: Fortkamp, 1994). For famous figures commenting on Tolstoy, see for instance Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (London: Mentor, 1957); George Orwell, *Lear, Tolstoy and the Fool*, available from http://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/lear/english/e_ltf [accessed 7 June 2006]; W. B. Gallie, 'Tolstoy: From "War and Peace" to "the Kingdom of God Is within You"', in *Philosophers of Peace and War: Kant, Clausewitz, Marx, Engels and Tolstoy* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Kennan, 'A Visit to Count Tolstoi'; Marc Slonim, 'Four Western Writers on Tolstoy', *Russian Review* 19/2 (1960).

¹² Christoyannopoulos, 'Leo Tolstoy on the State'; Hopton, 'Tolstoy, God and Anarchism'.

¹³ The best example of such exegesis is Leo Tolstoy, *What I Believe*, trans. Fyvie Mayo? (London: C. W. Daniel, 1902). Also very interesting is Leo Tolstoy, 'The Gospel in Brief', in *A Confession and the Gospel in Brief*, trans. Aylmer Maude (London: Oxford University Press, 1933).

¹⁴ See, for instance: Leo Tolstoy, 'The Restoration of Hell', 'The Kingdom of God Is within You', 'An Appeal to the Clergy', 'Church and State', 'Reason and Religion: A Letter to an Inquirer', 'Religion and Morality', 'What Is Religion, and Wherein Lies Its Essence?', all in Maude, *On Life and Essays on Religion*.

¹⁵ Even Tolstoy's 'religiosity' turns out not to be a big difference between him and other anarchists, because Tolstoy's approach to religion is very rationalistic and deistic, and he certainly did not see God as some kind of supernatural tyrant. For more on this, see for instance A. A. Guseinov, 'Faith, God, and Nonviolence in the Teachings of Lev Tolstoy', *Russian Studies in Philosophy* 38/2 (1999); E. B. Greenwood, 'Tolstoy and Religion', in *New Essays on Tolstoy*, ed. Malcolm Jones (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Hopton, 'Tolstoy, God and Anarchism'.

¹⁶ On top of the texts cited as Tolstoy's appeals to social reformers and revolutionaries, see Leo Tolstoy, 'The Law of Love and the Law of Violence', in *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*, trans. Jane Kentish (London: Penguin, 1987); Leo Tolstoy, 'On Anarchy', in Stephens, *Government Is Violence*.

¹⁷ Leo Tolstoy, 'The Slavery of Our Times', in *Essays from Tula*, trans. Free Age Press (London: Sheppard, 1948); Lyof N. Tolstoï, *What to Do?* (London: Walter Scott).

¹⁸ Christoyannopoulos, 'Leo Tolstoy on the State'; Tolstoy, 'The Kingdom of God Is within You'.

¹⁹ Leo Tolstoy, 'Bethink Yourselves!', in Maude, *Recollections and Essays*; Leo Tolstoy, 'Christianity and Patriotism', and 'Patriotism and Government', both in *The Kingdom of God and Peace Essays*, trans. Aylmer Maude (New Delhi: Rupa, 2001); Leo Tolstoy, 'Patriotism, or Peace?', in *Tolstoy's Writings on Civil Disobedience and Non-Violence*, trans. Aylmer Maude (New York: Bergman, 1967).

²⁰ Tolstoy, 'Christianity and Patriotism'.

²¹ Leo Tolstoy, 'A Confession', in Kentish, *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*; Tolstoy, 'Church and State'; Tolstoy, 'The Kingdom of God Is within You'.

²² Tolstoy, 'The Kingdom of God Is within You'; Tolstoy, 'Bethink Yourselves!'.