Eccentric Yet Still Prophetic: Leo Tolstoy’s Christian Anarchist Thought

In the last thirty years of his life, Leo Tolstoy wrote countless books, essays and pamphlets expounding his newly-articulated views on truth, violence, the state, the church, and on how to improve the human condition. Since then, these ‘Christian anarchist’ views have been dismissed as utopian or naive, and despite inspiring numerous activists, often forgotten or ignored. This paper aims to assess his political thought and its critics in order to consider whether any of his views might be relevant to the political challenges facing today’s world. The paper therefore considers his quest for truth, his pacifism, his anarchism, his anti-clericalism and his militantism, each time discussing criticisms and seeking to reflect on the potential relevance of his political thought in the contemporary world arena.

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Introduction

Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) produced two of the world’s most acclaimed works of fiction in *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, but at the time of his death was at least as famous for the radical religious and political views he propounded in the last thirty years of his life. These ‘Christian anarchist’ reflections are sometimes remembered today within pacifist and anarchist circles, but are barely known outside those. This lack of knowledge about Tolstoy’s Christian anarchist writings might have as much to do with their eccentric radicalism as with their drowning in the downpour of mass violence which submerged the world in the years that followed his death. However, Tolstoy’s thoughts, eccentric perhaps but also perceptive and stirring, continue to merit attention in a world in which the violence he abhorred, far from being eradicated, remains both present and threatening.

The aim of this paper is to outline five core aspects of Tolstoy's thought and muse on their continuing relevance today. These are: his pacifism, his anarchism, his anti-clericalism and his activism, preceded by a more biographical section on the peculiar method and trajectory which led him to those. Each section will be structured in three parts in order to consider first what Tolstoy said, then what some of his critics retorted, and then how relevant those thoughts arguably remain today.

1. Quest for truth

It is worth starting with Tolstoy’s intellectual trajectory not only in order to better understand his views, but also to compare it to similar trajectories by other seekers of truth, past and present.¹

1a. What Tolstoy said

Tolstoy had achieved family bliss and literary fame with *War and Peace* when he was writing *Anna Karenina* in the 1870s. He was, however, increasingly agonizing about death and the meaning of life. It was not death as such that worried him, but the apparent meaninglessness of life given that death is to

follow: he worried that the inevitability of death rendered all activities futile. This angst drove him to read broadly and research “all branches of knowledge”, and for years, he says, he “found nothing”.2

The breakthrough came around 1879, when he observed that the peasants on his estate, despite seeming well aware of death, seemed to approach it with calm and serenity. An important factor, it seemed, was their faith. Tolstoy therefore resolved to study the Bible again to try to find the source of their serenity. Quickly, however, he found many parts of Christian scripture and dogmas difficult to believe and agree with. Tolstoy could only understand and ponder what appeared rational. Anything that appeared irrational in the Bible and in the church’s teaching, he discounted or explained away on rational terms.

One could therefore classify Tolstoy as a deist. He reduced religion to morality, and from its cosmology could only keep what he deemed to make rational sense. He thus took from Christianity the moral teaching and example of Jesus, but not the resurrection, the miracles, the virgin birth and so on. He furthermore studied the teaching of other religious traditions, and again could only understand what seemed rational in them – mostly their moral teaching. According to Tolstoy, the core ethical teaching of all those traditions was best encapsulated by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

One might ask how this really resolved his existential angst. The answer is not clear, and Tolstoy does not really explain this clearly once and for all, so his answer needs to be deduced from his later writings. It seems that Tolstoy comes to terms with the inevitable death of each and every one of us through the realisation that society and human institutions outlive us all, so a worthy dedication of life might be to contribute to improving those. We do all die, but as a community we live on, and there is some meaningfulness in trying to improve the conditions in which life continues despite our individual deaths.

Tolstoy spent most of his life searching for truth and the secret of happiness, analysing the world we live in and trying to make sense of it. In the last thirty years of his life, however, he seemed confident to have found the answer to his most important questions, and he resolved himself to try to move the world towards similar conclusions.

1b. Criticism
Tolstoy’s intellectual trajectory is a peculiar one. He liked to stress a clear break in his life and thought before and after his ‘conversion’, but most of his biographers see clear continuities, especially in his craving for meaning and purpose to life. His biographers have often commented on his peculiar mix of perceptiveness and zeal, sharp analysis and stubborn self-assurance, inquisitiveness and conviction. He has been portrayed fondly as an interesting eccentric, as someone with clear gifts but also a degree of naivety – almost

comparable to a passionate, quixotic yet talented teenager. His political and religious thought has often been dismissed offhand on that basis, as was illustrated again by the various commentaries published for the 2010 commemorations for the centenary of his death.

Another criticism that has been levelled at him is that he could only have contemplated these questions because of the time and leisure he could enjoy as a member of the privileged aristocracy. This, it is said, is not given to all of us, so Tolstoy cannot expect us all to have as much time to think and read and somehow reach the same conclusions as him. At the same time, of course, this in itself does not mean that Tolstoy was wrong – simply that he was lucky and privileged to have been able to even ponder these questions in such depth.

A more substantial criticism is that Tolstoy's account of religion was too crudely rationalistic. His dismissal of the resurrection in particular means to some that he cannot be considered a 'Christian', because he denies a central tenet of that faith. Besides, the deification of 'reason' typical of Enlightenment thought has come to be criticised more recently (e.g. by post-colonial and post-structuralist schools) for the questionable nature of 'universality' and because such universalism is seen by some as a form of neo-colonial imperialism. Moreover, another argument goes, religion should not be reduced solely to morality. Moral guidelines are important aspects of all religious traditions, but there is much more to religion too, and Tolstoy is guilty of ignoring all those other aspects that make religions a lot richer than a mere moral code can be.

Critics have also argued that Tolstoy's answer to the meaning of life is not that successful or convincing. On Life, the long essay which Tolstoy wrote to clarify this answer, is not his best essay. The early draft he presented to a meeting of the philosophy professoriate in Moscow was not particularly well received. However, that does not mean that his reflections on violence, politics and religion are not worth considering – just that his answer to the meaning of life may not help many others facing that question.

1c. Contemporary relevance

Despite these significant criticisms, Tolstoy's pursuit of truth remains interesting to reflect on. For a start, the question of the meaning of life obviously remains open. Many of us might do our best to ignore it, but as for Tolstoy, at various junctures of life, it comes back to haunt us. Why are we here, how can we live a meaningful life, indeed is there any meaning to it at all – these are fundamental questions which most of us ask at least some times, and for which philosophy and religion offer us potential guidance. Tolstoy provides us with an example of someone who stopped ignoring these questions and decided to relentlessly pursue them head-on. We may not agree with his answers, but at least Tolstoy had the determination and stamina to face those questions despite the angst they

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give rise to, and both his particular journey and its conclusions provide food for thought for those seeking truth and justice today.

‘Reason’ can indeed be criticised in some circles today, yet the momentous achievements of science are based on it. Perhaps reason has too often been used as an excuse to impose ethnocentric policies instead of respecting local traditions (and this should be acknowledged and avoided), yet what other tool have we against superstitions, obscurantism, and other threatening ghosts whose harm litters the annals of history? Is one of the central aims of education not to foster a critical and rational mind? Indeed how unpopular is reason really today? Do many critical citizens not use ‘reason’ to measure claims thrown at them? The critique of ‘reason’ and ‘rationalism’ articulated by a variety of scholars in recent decades is rich and important, but has yet to completely and convincingly invalidate the sort of reflections articulated by nineteenth-century thinkers such as Tolstoy. Besides, perhaps Tolstoy went quite far in dismissing all of Christianity that he judged to be irrational, but then he is not alone in this. Numerous agnostics and atheists will be sympathetic, as will indeed those Christians who are minded to filter some of the traditional package of Christianity in light of evolving science. Tolstoy’s rationalism might be fairly extreme, but rationalistic approaches are still adopted by many nowadays – Tolstoy’s thought, therefore, can still find sympathetic ears in the twenty-first century.

As to the claim that religious traditions should not be completely reduced to morality, it remains the case that ethical concerns are quite central to them. Every religious tradition advocates certain types of behaviour and frowns upon others. There may well be much more to Christianity than the moral teaching of Jesus, but then that teaching is part of it too. Tolstoy might be rightly accused of ignoring or dismissing many Christian dogmas, but then could many avowed Christians today not equally be accused of ignoring or dismissing Jesus’ moral teaching? Tolstoy’s views on the facets of Christianity which he dismissed may not stir everyone’s interests, but what he does say about Jesus’ moral teaching is still worth paying some attention to, because it is central to both the Christian story and, according to Tolstoy, actually rather rational and wise.

2. Pacifism

The pivotal theme in Tolstoy’s Christian anarchist writings is his rejection of violence. Upon it rest his anarchism, activism and (indirectly) his anti-clericalism.

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On Tolstoy’s pacifism, see for instance: Alexandre Christoyannopoulos, Christian Anarchism: A Political Commentary on the Gospel (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010), chap. 1; Alexandre 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); McKeogh, Tolstoy’s Pacifism (Amherst, New York: Cambria, 2009).
2a. What Tolstoy said

The teaching of Jesus that influenced Tolstoy the most was his call, in the Sermon on the Mount, to ‘turn the other cheek’ to whoever strikes you on the right one. Reflecting on this passage, on the many other sayings of Jesus on love and forgiveness, and on the violence that had plagued human relations, Tolstoy came to the view that violence is always wrong, always a mistake, always counter-productive. Violence, for Tolstoy, always generates more violence, because those to whom violence is done will feel anger and resentment, will not see the justice of the violence they suffered, and will therefore seek violent retaliation further down the line. Violence for Tolstoy only ever feeds a vicious cycle of tit-for-tat violence.

For Tolstoy, Jesus proposes a radically different, indeed revolutionary alternative method to overcome this vicious cycle. That is, when a violence or injustice is done against you, do not strike back, but respond with love, forgiveness and generosity. Only that way, Tolstoy interprets Jesus to have said, can the cycle of violence be broken.

Implicit in this response is the attempt to see, respect and address the human being in the person committing evil and violence – in other words a refusal to dehumanise that enemy. A loving and forgiving response is not what the violent enemy expects. Instead of treating that enemy with anger and disdain, a forgiving response treats him with unexpected magnanimousness and respect, which in turn opens the possibility for reconciliation.

Tolstoy relates that teaching of Jesus with another theme which he alights on a number of times in the gospels: the counsel not to judge one another lest we be judged by that same measure, not to criticise our neighbour for a mote in their eye when there is a beam in ours, the story of the adulteress about to be stoned, and so on. For Tolstoy, what Jesus means is that we are all imperfect and sinful ourselves, so perhaps we should refrain from judging others too quickly. This in turn makes it all the more important not to use violence in acting upon that potentially mistaken and hypocritical judgement.

Tolstoy’s implicit hope is that a virtuous cycle of love and forgiveness can be juxtaposed on the vicious cycle of violence and revenge. Both cycles are contagious and inspire responses in kind. With enough courageous forgivers, perhaps the cycle of violence can one day be overpowered and overcome.

What is also implicit in this Tolstoyan reading in that we should forego any attempt to teach morality top-down through the use (or threat) of coercion, but instead that we should seek to teach by example. Just as we learn to use coercive means to try to reach our ends in a world in which others do so too, the hope is that enough exemplars of patient love and forgiveness can similarly mimetically inspire that same behaviour too.

Of course, that is not easy, and Tolstoy recognised that. Indeed it takes courage to respond lovingly to someone who commits an injustice against you. The kneejerk reaction is to be angry and violent in return. That is the easiest, first,
and least reflective reaction. More courageous is the attempt to rise above these feelings and respond with patience and hope, leaving oneself vulnerable yet resolute in the refusal to be driven by the natural drive towards anger and retaliation. Responding to evil with love is an act of courage, not cowardice.

2b. Criticism

Is this teaching impossibly utopian? Many have said as much. Indeed much mainstream theology has laboured to argue that Jesus could not have meant this teaching literally, that it is too difficult and unrealistic to follow in this life – as if there would be any need for it in paradise (or hell, for that matter). For Tolstoy, such replies are copouts which betray Jesus’ teaching. He writes:

> It may be affirmed that the constant fulfilment of this rule is difficult, and that not every man 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.\(^6\)

It might be foolish and difficult, but Jesus clearly calls his followers to respond to evil with love. Indeed, Jesus exemplified that teaching himself, right unto his very death. The essence of Jesus’ teaching is about love and forgiveness, even if many of his official followers – despite otherwise venerating him as the Son of God, as the Christ, as God incarnate – have decided that he could not have really meant that.

Still, Jesus may have preached this, but that does not mean the teaching is sensible – especially to non-Christians. Here, though, Tolstoy’s argument is that surely, we have seen enough tit-for-tat violence in history, surely violence has been shown to have been such a catastrophic failure in teaching morality or approximating justice, that perhaps it is worth reminding ourselves of this admittedly high ideal which Jesus advocated. It might be near impossible, but should that mean that no attempts – or only the vaguest ones – should be made in trying to approach it? It might be utopian, but at least, the Tolstoyan argument goes, it sets an ideal to try to genuinely work towards.

There is, of course, a potentially more devastating criticism, and it usually comes in the form of a question. That is: what would you do, then, if your child were attacked by a paedophile? Or how do you deal with Hitler? Surely there is a limit to how far you can be loving and pacifist? But where, then, should that line be drawn?

Tolstoy did consider this line of criticism. One response was to note that the choice is not necessarily a dichotomous one between violence and passivity. Other, more creative responses are possible too. After all, Tolstoy’s most famous follower was Gandhi, and Gandhi demonstrated that Tolstoy’s uncompromising

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line on nonviolence could be translated into a political tactic to resist injustice.⁷ So the first element of an answer is to point out that there are options between passive capitulation and enraged retaliation – such as interposing one’s body, trying to engage verbally, calmly and rationally with the assailant, and indeed reacting by metaphorically turning the other cheek in an effort to expose the injustice and surprise the attacker into thinking again about their action.

However, this will not suffice in every situation. Such creative replies may transform the situation if only in the longer run, but equally they might not. What then? Would the nonviolent Tolstoyan cowardly let the injustice unfold? Tolstoy does tend to avoid a frontal answer to this question. He probably knew he himself could probably not commit to turning his cheek in the worst and most challenging situations, but he was wary of the think edge of the wedge. Once the justness of violence is conceded in extreme situations, opportunists quickly emerge to expand the range of scenarios, and before long an aggressive act is justified as measured and appropriate when clearly, for Tolstoy, it is not. Moreover, for Tolstoy, it is also worth reflecting on what is enabled when conceding the argument about exceptional predators needing exceptional measures. Tolstoy writes:

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.⁸

In other words, according to Tolstoy, those paedophiles and Hitlers may exist and need to be anticipated, but we also need to remember that the violence which, out of fear of relatively infrequent evildoers, we authorise the state machinery to inflict, is carried out on a much more industrial scale, and such unjust and industrial violence is inflicted on more than rare occasions. This defence is obviously not exactly comfortable, and does not quite respond to the question directly, but it is perhaps worth remembering the dangers of cold, industrial, state-driven violence and the risks of it being misused when we readily legitimise the existence of such an administrative giant on the back of fears of extremely horrible people. Still, it is difficult to deny that Tolstoy’s answer is not completely convincing, and perhaps his uncompromising rhetoric on non-violence does need to be relaxed in genuinely extreme cases.

Another difficulty with Tolstoy’s criticism of violence is that he provides no clear definition of what he means by ‘violence’, so one is left to deduce it from his comments. It seems quite clear that he is mostly referring to physical violence (the allegorical smiting of cheeks), or at least the compelling of someone to do as one. This, some critics today might suggest, is too narrow. What about psychological violence or discursive violence, for instance? Indeed, is Tolstoy, in his passionate denunciations, not arguably violent sometimes? Possibly. But

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Tolstoy’s primary concern is the physical violence that human beings inflict on their fellows. His arguments could perhaps be extended to other forms of violence, but his wish was to at least reduce the injuries and suffering caused by tangible, physical violence.

2c. Contemporary relevance

As already noted, Tolstoy’s writings on nonviolence inspired Gandhi – who in turn influenced many of the non-violent activists of the twentieth century. They also inspired numerous conscientious objectors to compulsory military conscription. Some commentators thus see Tolstoy as one of the forgotten fathers of the pacifist movement, though which his thought therefore exerts an indirect influence today.⁹

There are also people nowadays who, like Tolstoy, see Jesus as an interesting moral teacher – people who are not necessarily comfortable with some of the doctrines of Christianity but who find in Jesus some worthy and thought-provoking ethical teachings. Oddly perhaps given the centrality of love and forgiveness to his teaching, the Christian community at large has not quite led the pacifist revolution one could have expected from those who allegedly took up their cross and followed Jesus. Still, some Christian sects and churches have done their utmost to embrace Jesus’ morality, Christian thought does include pacifist thinkers such as John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas, and a sizeable number of Christians and non-Christians alike have adopted a similar approach to Tolstoy with regards to Jesus’ ethical teaching. Yet the Christian tradition is also responsible for originating Just War Theory – for Tolstoy, a blatant betrayal of the teaching of Jesus.

In any case, it remains important to unmask and denounce the violence that can be committed by today’s powers, especially when committed in our name. Democratic states have not always been honest and fair in administering their power over their own citizenry or indeed abroad, yet that violence is committed in the name of its citizens. Perhaps not enough such citizens speak out against some of the miscarriages of justice, abuses of power, violent repressions and other violent actions that can be carried out in the name of order and stability. Tolstoy would certainly rail against those, and expect Christians to do so too. This is all the more important given that the instruments of industrial violence are much more lethal today. Not just have nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons been invented and used since Tolstoy’s death, but the tentacles of surveillance reach further than ever before. When human institutions can wield such power, it is crucial than we reflect on the violence they can inflict and whether it is truly necessary.

Furthermore, the view that ethical behaviour can be taught by legislation ultimately resting on coercion has not subsided. Yet do we really behave morally because deviance from those morals will be punished, or do we behave morally because of the intrinsic validity of moral standards and because others have taught us their value by their example? Given the harm caused by violence, it might be worth reflecting, with Tolstoy and other anarchists, on how necessary it really is.

In short, Tolstoy’s pacifist thought invites us to reconsider our assumptions on how to approximate justice and morality. Whether individually or collectively, we readily assume that coercion, retaliation and punishment are appropriate methods, yet these methods frequently fail to prevent further violence. Given the harm that our own violence can cause, we could arguably be more reflective and probing before resorting to violence.

3. Anarchism

There have been enough hints of this so far: Tolstoy was an anarchist. That is, he saw it as an inevitable extension of his faithful pacifism that the state and its allegedly legitimate monopoly over the use of violence had to be denounced and rejected.10

3a. What Tolstoy said

The state, as scholars such as Max Weber would observe years after Tolstoy’s death, can be defined as the monopoly over the (allegedly) legitimate use of violence over a particular territory. Its reliance on violence is certainly one of its defining characteristics. For Tolstoy, therefore, anarchism followed logically from the teaching of Jesus: a consistent application of that teaching on violence cannot but threaten the state. In his own words: “Christianity in its true sense puts an end to the State. It was so understood from its very beginning, and for that Christ was crucified.”11 According to Tolstoy, Jesus’ teaching was always implicitly subversive of structures resting ultimately on violence or the threat of it, which the authorities of his day understood and had to punish him publically for.

It is evident from Tolstoy’s corpus – not just the Christian anarchist parts – that he held much respect and admiration for the rural life of contemporary Russian peasants. For him, small communities organised around agricultural labour were far better politically and morally than modern industrial society. One senses

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traces of Rousseau – who he deeply admired – in Tolstoy’s nostalgic eulogy for the smaller communities now increasingly swallowed by the onward march of industrial progress and political consolidation. Tolstoy preferred the life of smaller scale rural communities to that administered by the modern state.

Tolstoy was suspicious of the state, including when nominally democratic. Democratic or not, the state uses physical violence and the threat of it, does not love its enemies, and judges its citizens – all of which Tolstoy saw as clear contraventions of Jesus’ teaching and as ultimately irrational and unjust. Yet the state is only ‘what we make of it’: as a structure, it is constituted by its agents. In democratic states in particular, the violence committed by the state is violence we commit against one another through it – the state commits it in our name.

Besides, majority rule, for Tolstoy, does not guarantee the attainment of justice any better than other systems:

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.12

Put differently: the tyranny of a majority is still tyranny. In majority rule, laws can still be imposed on an unwilling minority – and this, on behalf of the majority.

For Tolstoy, however, “‘[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.’”13 Laws are enforced through violence or the threat of it. Yet for him, there is no way of justifying someone’s violence as more legitimate than another’s. In typically syllogistic fashion, he says:

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.14

For Tolstoy, it is simply wrong to inflict violence on other human beings, because they are as capable as us to think rationally and be reasoned with. Moral behaviour cannot be taught by coercion – what coercion does teach, though, is that coercion is a way of getting others to do as you wish.

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14 Tolstoy, “The Slavery of Our Times,” 119, Tolstoy’s emphasis.
Moreover, Tolstoy argued that the state system is so arranged that it becomes easy to think that somebody else is responsible for state violence:

At the bottom of the social ladder soldiers with rifles, revolvers, and swords, torture and murder men and by those means compel them to become soldiers. And these soldiers are fully convinced that the responsibility for their deed is taken from them by the officers who order those actions. At the top of the ladder the Tsars, presidents, and ministers, decree these tortures and murders and conscriptions. And they are fully convinced that since they are either placed in authority by God, or the society they rule over demands such decrees from them, they cannot be held responsible.

Between these extremes are the intermediate folk who superintend the acts of violence and the murders and the conscriptions of the soldiers. And these, too, are fully convinced that they are relieved of all responsibility, partly because orders received by them from their superiors, and partly because such orders are expected from them by those on the lower steps of the ladder.15

Because we are all mere cogs in a complex machine, we easily absolve ourselves from the less laudable ‘outputs’ of that machinery – if we even know about those at all. This is obviously dangerous in that the productive efforts of all the agents who constitute this structure can be harnessed towards goals which most of them would not pursue themselves, but let be pursued by the broader structure and those who control it.

Ultimately, Tolstoy reckoned (just like many other Left-wing thinkers), the real purpose of the state’s coercive apparatus is to protect the loot of the elite, both that stolen in wars of adventure abroad and that stolen from the fruits of labourers’ labour. Indeed for Tolstoy, the capitalist system amounts to wage slavery for the many. As he puts it:

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.16

The system is arguably more perverse, because the fact of enslavement is hidden. Today’s slave Johns might be in China or Brazil, and today’s slave-owners might be anonymous investments funds, but this merely hides better from the average saver and producer the raw implications of their relationship. The employment contract might allegedly be signed between equal parties, but it is not equal, because those who own property can own slaves and those who do not, cannot. Again like others Marxists, socialists and anarchists, Tolstoy sees property distribution as the basis of an asymmetric and unjust system. For him, though, private property is not nefarious only because of the unequal economic relations it institutionalises, but also because it generates greed, covetousness and a

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concomitant moral depravity – and this, among both the haves and the have-nots.\(^\text{17}\)

In the end, Tolstoy argued, the state works like a protection racket:

Governments, 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.\(^\text{18}\)

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.”\(^\text{19}\)

The state, for Tolstoy, has the same legitimacy as the mafia.

Tolstoy therefore despises the state because it is an institution which is violent, unjust and protects the interests of a narrow elite against those of the very masses that constitute it. Tolstoy’s pacifism, along with his analysis of the political economy and the mechanics of collective actions, led him to his anarchism.

3b. Criticism

One criticism of Tolstoy’s anarchism is that it is too quick in his black-and-white logic, too simplistic, too categorical. Tolstoy can indeed be a little disingenuous in his illustrations and comparisons, and perhaps he is wrong in rejecting every possible state just because it can be violent sometimes. Then again, what he says about state violence does seem to hold when the state is indeed violent, and every state – democratic or not – has shown capable of adopting such violence. Hence Tolstoy might be too quick to condemn the state, but his observations about state violence might still hold true when the state does adopt such violence – which might be more often than we like to remember.

Nevertheless, as some on the Left who might otherwise feel sympathetic to Tolstoy might say, the state today is not just police and prisons and armies – at its best it is also health care and education and social and economic safety nets. Are these acquis sociaux not worth preserving? Tolstoy died before a lot of those emerged – would he not revise his rejection of the state now? Perhaps. Yet it is also worth remembering that ever since the rise of uninhibited neoliberalism in the 1980s, that facet of the state is being actively eroded (and this, in those instances where it was quite developed in the first place), whereas its machinery of surveillance, repression and war is spreading its tentacles rather firmly. Not all that the state does is bad from a caring and loving perspective, yet its core business remains law-making along with its apparatus of coercion and violence. States that fail to perform that protective role are seen as failing in their core mission. Whatever else the state does, it can only start operating if it does monopolise the officially legitimate mechanisms of violence.


\(^\text{19}\) Tolstoy, “The Kingdom of God Is within You,” 199.
Another set of critics of Tolstoy have argued that (representative) democracy, however imperfect, is still the best system we know. Churchill’s words are often quoted: “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms which have been tried from time to time”. Perhaps. Yet is this not a rather damning condemnation of human creativity and humanity’s collective potential? If representative democracies plagued with voter apathy, fuelled by partisan funding and whipped by the media into a celebrity-spectacle is the best we can really do, then so be it. Yet some think democracy can be more than such a façade, that it can be more direct, more participative, more ambitious and more accountable. Such more deeply democratic forms of government have been experimented with in smaller-scale towns and movements and various organisations. Could some such experiments not be improved and expanded? Is representative democracy as practiced in the West today really satisfactory enough to stop aiming for better? Is this the best we can do? Tolstoy would encourage us to think otherwise, and perhaps too many of us settle for what utopians and hopefuls would see as a mediocre lack of ambitions.

And yet, some might still retort, surely the state is needed to deal with criminals, with foreign aggression, and to regulate human interaction. Perhaps. But this does this way of ‘dealing’ with those really ‘work’, really prevent criminality and aggression, really act as the deterrents they are proclaimed to be? Do they even come close to eradicating these problems in the long run? Human interactions do not necessarily require the threat of violence to follow certain agreed customs, and criminality and injustice are not that particularly successfully prevented by the state and its dedicated apparatus. Indeed various experiments in restorative justice have provided plenty of arguments for more creative approaches to dealing with criminality and aggression than the model which projects some sort of allegedly caring and wise but strict and often authoritarian father.

3c. Contemporary relevance

Today's ‘state’ does, it is true, look very different to Tolstoy’s days. It is bigger, its coercive apparatus is more far-reaching, it can administer violence even more lethally and clinically should it choose to, and it has depersonalised and institutionalised the functions of government even further. The agents of the state arguably have even less sight today of the eventual impact of the policies they contribute to as mere cogs of an extensive machine. In short: the state has certainly evolved and looks very different today that in Tolstoy’s Russia, yet its coercive machinery is stronger than ever.

Furthermore, the apparatus of oppression equivalent today to what Tolstoy criticises as the ‘state’ is arguably broader and more complicated than can be encapsulated by the notion of ‘state’. Just as the target of anarchist criticism has evolved from the nineteenth-century focus on the state to a broader network of globalised structures of patriarchy and oppression underpinned by the state but also including economic, cultural and other elements, so can Tolstoy’s anarchism be applied more broadly today to this broader variety of inter-related structures of oppression. Indeed Tolstoy’s anarchist critique of political violence and
deception might be even more important in the twenty-first century given the globalised scale of the phenomena he wrote about and given the critical analyses of capitalism, gender, ethnicity and suchlike which have been articulated since his death. Although the state underpins other structures of oppression, it is no longer as central a focus of anarchist ire as it was among the anarchists of Tolstoy’s days.

These days, nonetheless, concrete state violence – including in democracies – comes in many varieties, including for instance police at demonstrations, visible walls such as borders or invisible walls between classes, war, prisons, and the expanding criminalisation of deviant behaviour. In all those examples and indeed many other, agents of the state can and no-so-infrequently do inflict physical violence on human beings, directly and indirectly. And yet today perhaps more than ever before, those agents of the state are led to disassociate themselves from any responsibility in those acts: one person signs the form, another moves the outlaw, another decides how they shall be treated, and so on, such that the administration of state violence ultimately appears impersonal and anonymous, and its agents feel no responsibility for it but see that responsibility as resting elsewhere in the system. And yet in democratic states in particular, what the state does, it does in the name of its demos, therefore it is arguably all the more important for that demos to be fully conscious of the full picture of state activity.

Tolstoy’s anarchist thought is also worth reflecting upon for Left-wing Christian reformers and revolutionaries. Those inspired by ‘theologies of liberation’, for instance, might wish to consider the arguments made by Tolstoy – and indeed other Christian anarchists such as Ellul, Eller and Andrews – on the potential perils of compromising with state power and violence. It is, after all, by taking control of the reigns of the state that much liberation theology seeks to emancipate and empower the oppressed. Tolstoy would be sympathetic to the aims of liberation theology, but would warn against such compromises with the state’s apparatus of violence.

Apart from that, many aspects of Tolstoy’s anarchism have been aired by others on the Left. Whilst on the one hand, it means Tolstoy’s views are not completely original (save perhaps in their couching in a strict form of pacifism), on the other, it also means his arguments find echo among other thinkers and activists. For instance, his criticism of the state is obviously shared by many anarchists, and his views on economic injustice with the broader Left. Where Tolstoy remains particularly original nonetheless is where he invites us to reconsider common assumptions about the state as a vehicle for reform as well as our role in the violence and injustice of the system.

4. Anti-clericalism

Tolstoy’s conclusions about the central meaning of Jesus’ teaching led him to reflect on why this understanding of it was not advocated more visibly by his official followers, and this in turn led him to the conclusion that the church had
belied and betrayed that teaching and its mission – a message he was eager for Christians in particular to hear.20

4a. What Tolstoy said

For Tolstoy, this betrayal of Jesus is typified by Emperor Constantine’s ‘conversion’ to Christianity, when instead of adapting the empire to Christianity, the latter was adapted to the former – in other words modified beyond recognition to suit the interests of the establishment. Ever since that conversion, the official church has cuddled with state power, legitimising whatever regime happens to be protecting it and in exchange for such comfort and protection. For Tolstoy, the mainstream church has actually become the Antichrist – portraying itself as the body of Christ but in fact working against Christ.

Tolstoy also slated the sanctimonious tone with which the church preached its corrupted interpretation. For instance, Tolstoy denounced 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. The former was just a collection of men as likely to be fallible as any other.

Tolstoy was particularly dismissive of the various ways through which church theologians reduce the importance of Jesus’ most important commandments. Tolstoy expects those who claim to follow of Jesus to follow his teaching and example. Like other Christian radicals, he is therefore scathing of much of the official church for not really doing so, indeed for even wilfully discounting Jesus’ ethics and distracting its flock by what Tolstoy sees fantastic dogmas and stupefying rituals. “It was not meant for this world but for the next”; “what is important is the attempt to love enemies in one’s heart”; “it only applied to enemies at the time of Jesus and the world is very different today” – all such arguments, according Tolstoy, are cowardly and despicable betrayals of the core of teaching of the one who they claim to follow. Tolstoy’s strong language attests to the extent to which he felt the church has betrayed its original mission – to teach and exemplify the radical morality preached by Jesus.

Tolstoy further accused the church of deploying a broad arsenal of mental trickery to distract the masses from Jesus’ revolutionary morality, including: the idea that miracles somehow provide proof of church creeds; the focus on external worship in which impossible propositions are repeated robotically (again as a distraction from the essence of Christianity); the deliberate mixing of truths with falsehoods in order to drown the former in the latter; and the way in which all this combines to stifle reason and basically amounts to carefully planned hypnotism. All this, according to Tolstoy, was calculated precisely to dilute Jesus’ revolutionary morality.

For such views, predictably enough, Tolstoy was excommunicated – though this excommunication came only in reaction to the publication of Tolstoy’s third main novel, *Resurrection*. If anything, the result was to spur Tolstoy into publishing even more blunt criticisms of the Russian Orthodox Church. The church did try to re-admit Tolstoy into its congregation on his deathbed – in the hope that it could trumpet a victory if it could claim that Tolstoy admitted his errors and returned to a church that magnanimously forgave him at the last gasp. Tolstoy, of course, refused.

4b. Criticism

Some have argued that not all institutional Christianity is that noxious, and that the Russian Orthodox Church in Tsarist Russia was a particularly pronounced case of what he criticised. There have also been many examples of Christian groups across time and place that were much closer to Jesus’ teaching that the mainline church – indeed Tolstoy recognised and praised these. Nevertheless, much Christianity does tend to come close to what Tolstoy criticises. Moreover, with time, many of even the more radical Christian sects which Tolstoy praised have made compromises, become comfortable and gradually lost their more radical aspirations. In other words, a process of institutionalisation does seem to systematically dampen the originally more radical offshoots of Christianity.

Some will argue that even institutional Christianity tries its best to spread the gospel and be the beacon of divine will on earth, and there may well be many examples of this. Then again, institutional churches have also pursued less than pure ideals sometimes, and many examples could be cited when it seems to have prioritised all sorts of things – such as its wealth and comfort, it protected status, its proselytism – instead of Jesus’ teaching and example.

Some will also argue that traditions and hierarchies ought to be respected, that there are reasons for them, that it is too brash and dangerous to unsettle them. But traditions and hierarchies can be wrong too and have done much harm in the past. As such, traditions are not necessarily worth more respect than new thinking – especially when injustice, violence and oppression prevail.
4c. Contemporary relevance

It may seem when watching from much of Western Europe today that anticlericalism has become largely irrelevant – religion, it is said, has been losing much influence as society has gradually secularised. Yet, as recent scholarship on postsecularity has argued, it seems premature to expect it to disappear in the way much Enlightenment thought had expected it to.

For a start, even in Western European countries – those often cited as the most secularised – state and church are rarely fully separated. In some European countries, the subsistence of the clergy is funded by the state; in others, the Christian ‘heritage’ forms an integral part of national identity (so church property might be maintained and preserved by state funds, for instance); in many, the symbols and iconography of one are present in the other; and so on. In short, religion still influences politics and vice versa, even in much of Western Europe. The collaboration between church and state which Tolstoy criticised so vehemently still persists to a significant degree.

This is even truer outside Western Europe – not least in Tolstoy’s own country, as demonstrated for example by the Pussy Riot affair. The clergy remains very powerful in Russia and elsewhere. Much institutional religion across the globe, that is, still behaves in the ways Tolstoy criticised – so despite decades of secularisation in Western Europe, much of what Tolstoy said about the Christian church remains as apposite today as he felt it to be a century ago. Indeed, church theologians continue to cite many of the arguments mocked by Tolstoy to justify Christian submission to the established political and economic regime.

At the same time, a considerable number of Westerners have become visibly disillusioned by ‘institutional’ Christianity, especially since the Second World War. Whilst scholars still debate the extent of secularisation in the West, there is broad agreement that religiosity has evolved. Many have turned away from church attendance been attracted by new, more personal, expressions of spirituality – and Tolstoy’s critique of the church may well resonate with the views of those who have consciously moved away from the church, as well as with atheists and other religious sceptics.

More to the point, Tolstoy would wish to reiterate those arguments to those who consider themselves Christians today. His writings (including his detailed exegeses) invite Christians to reconsider Jesus’ teaching anew, to question or bypass the exegesis preached from traditional church pulpits and make their own mind up on whether Jesus did not quite clearly and deliberately call his followers to exemplify the morality he preached. Tolstoy might be an eccentric and anti-clerical Christian thinker, but he contributes to Christian thought nonetheless. The main reason he was so hostile to the church was because he felt that it was diluting, dismissing and ignoring the very essence of Jesus’ teaching. There is every chance he would feel similarly today, though he would praise and encourage those Christians who question the veracity of the comfortable

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church's interpretation and who try to wholeheartedly follow Jesus' teaching and example. In other words, Tolstoy's anti-clericalism is addressed primarily to Christians, for them to become more Christ-like.

In short, Tolstoy's anti-clericalism is not as dated as might seem. Christian churches are still influential, and the arguments they use to draw attention away from Jesus’ revolutionary morality are similar to those Tolstoy targeted. Tolstoy's writings on the church invite Christians to reconsider the role and place of the church in their Christianity, the question the arguments and reach their own conclusions about the interpretations of the self-appointed official intermediaries of God on earth.

5. Activism

If the global arena is so violent and its institutions are failing to deliver justice, how, then, are we to respond? What does Tolstoy expect from Christians and pacifists in particular? In other words, what is to be done, and how?22

5a. What Tolstoy said

Tolstoy was very concerned with the growing popularity of violent methods among the revolutionaries of his day – not least in Russia. This was the era of the anarchist wave of terrorism, of mounting tit-for-tat revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence. Tolstoy warned that violent methods would 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. For him:

Anarchists 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.23

Tolstoy could understand 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 for Tolstoy, as explained above, violence was not the way to go. Surely, Tolstoy hoped, 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?"24 Tolstoy would thus invite twenty-first activists to think carefully about the tactics they adopt and about the risks of compromising with violence.

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22 For Tolstoy’s thoughts on what is to be done, see for instance: George Kennan, "A Visit to Count Tolstoi," The Century Magazine 34/2 (1887); Tolstoi, What to Do; Leo Tolstoy, "Bethink Yourselves!," in Recollections and Essays, trans. Aylmer Maude (London: Oxford University Press, 1937); Leo Tolstoy, "What's to Be Done?" in Recollections and Essays, trans. Aylmer Maude (London: Oxford University Press, 1937).


Injustice must be denounced, but for Tolstoy, the only truly revolutionary method is 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).” According to Tolstoy, the only true revolution 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:

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 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.

Tolstoy thought – or at least hoped – that the world might be transformed by enough pioneers adopting Jesus’ method instead of resorting to the violence they felt entitled to. He hoped that enough people living and relating to each other differently might inspire others to do the same.

Tolstoy himself tried to transform the way he lived. He became a vegetarian, he laboured his fields, he donated most of his royalties, and he argued endlessly with his wife about what to do with his property. As a campaigner, he tirelessly wrote dozens of books, letters, articles and pamphlets reacting to ongoing events, appealing to powerful people and institutions, pleading his contemporaries to reject violence and to disassociate themselves from the state and church. For this, predictably, his writings were censored, and his followers persecuted (though the authorities dared not persecute him lest they turn him into a martyr).

Finally, some have remarked that Tolstoy, far from adhering to the non-resistance advocated by Jesus in the verse about turning the other cheek, in fact advocated a form of non-violent resistance. Tolstoy spoke out against the regime, encourages conscripts to refuse their conscription, and advocated a form of resistance to the state by withdrawing from it. Yet it seems that Jesus did ‘resist’ in some sense too. He denounced religious authorities and overturned tables in the temple. In his actions, however, he remained non-violent (whether violence against humans was used in the temple cleansing episode is questionable), and forgiving, even as he was being crucified. It seems, therefore, that some degree of

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27 Christoyannopoulos, Christian Anarchism, 102-106.
‘resistance’, or certainly some reaction to injustice, is part of what Jesus preached – though the spectrum of options probably lies between the temple cleansing and turning the other cheek. What Tolstoy calls for is rather similar. His own writings do display some ambivalence between non-resistance and non-violent resistance. But even if what is called for is resistance, crucially, of course, it is to remain non-violent in that resistance.

5b. Criticism

Nonviolent revolutionaries have their critics. One criticism is that nonviolent resistance does not work, that it has only ever worked when violent campaigners had also been fighting for the same cause too – ever Martin Luther King has its Malcolm X. That may be true. And yet many a revolution hinged on the change of allegiance of keep protectors of the regime – the army, the middle class, the commercial elite, and so on. In those pivotal moments when revolutionary demands are conceded, does the courageous refusal to adopt violence by many – despite the reactionary violence inflicted on them in their attempt to improve things – not play at least some role in convincing those protectors of the status quo to withdraw their protection? Most pacifist campaigners had their violent counterparts, but the opposite is true too, and the refusal to adopt violence by many often played a significant part in helping convince the regime protectors of the legitimacy of the revolutionaries.

One further criticism of Tolstoy’s recommendations is that it would lead to a collective suicide. If we all turn the other cheek in the face of evil, the worst people will take over, and civilisation will be sacrificed. This seems true if indeed the evildoers have no heart and would never repent, but of course Tolstoy’s hope is that their heart might turn in the face of a form of denunciation which displays unexpected and determined love and forgiveness.

Others could argue that, even were it to work, Tolstoy’s method to improve the human condition is too slow, that it would take too long and we do not have such time. This might be true, and the ecological crisis, to name but one, may indeed be a challenge that cannot wait much longer to be addressed. At the same time, if a revised moral order is not one that is wanted and willed by all, if therefore coercive means are needed to enforce it, then more violence and injustice will ensue, rendering that moral order unstable again. For Tolstoy, transformations that are imposed are never stable or satisfactory.

5c. Contemporary relevance

The question of how to improve the world is no less important and debated today. Whatever the promises of secular (or indeed religious) ideologies, much suffering, injustice and violence persist to date. Freedom, equality, indeed even true democracy remain closer to utopian aspirations than reality. Many have opted for formal institutional channels to try to improve things, but the global political economy is becoming more unequal, weapons and their potential for mass destruction are spreading, and many good intentions seem to get diluted and lost in those institutional channels that are meant to help reach them. Many
therefore face the uncomfortable realisation that our institutions are failing, and wonder how best to proceed. To those seekers of truth and justice, Tolstoy’s writings on the dangers of violent methods remain worth reflecting upon.

More generally, many today still concede that violence is sometimes necessary – whether to implement reforms through the state or to resist injustice outside it. Good ends can, in the eyes of many, justify violent means. In other words, the very same justifications of violence which Tolstoy criticised remain widespread nowadays. Yet one interesting development in the past century is the emergence of pacifist forms of activism and denunciations of violence. As already noted, Mohandas Gandhi – possibly the most notorious hero of pacifist activism – was directly inspired by Tolstoy. His non-violent struggle for Indian independence applied Tolstoy’s thought as a tactic of resistance, and that tactic has, in turn, been adopted and adapted by many since Gandhi. Tolstoy’s own activism may not have been fully developed into the non-violent militancy of many of his indirect followers, but his thought does remain influential today in and through pacifist activists.

In any case, (at least) three colossal challenges face humanity: an ecological crisis, deeply unstable and unsustainable global economy, and the security challenges posed by the continuing proliferation of weapons – both conventional and of mass destruction. These challenges are all potentially very dangerous, will not be contained within artificial human borders, and require more radical solutions than those likely to come from established institutions. This calls for action, for a collective human awakening. The Global Justice Movement shares those concerns, and to its campaigners Tolstoy would reiterate his warnings about adopting violent means.

However, Tolstoy would not only address radicals and revolutionaries. He would call us all to awaken to the violence and suffering perpetrated within the global political economy, and crucially to our role in it by both legitimising it and staffing it. He would call us to choose carefully the role we play, however small, in this global context. Following Tolstoy, one could argue that there are at least four ways in which we all make choices which we could make differently: as producers, consumers, citizens and community members. As producers, we spend decades of our professional lives working in a particular sector. Tolstoy would urge us to think carefully about what that profession is dedicated to – is it public service, is it science, is it the weapons industry, fossil fuel, merely the interests of profit maximising? Similarly, we all consume, but do we consume local or organic products? Where and under what working conditions were these products produced? Whose pockets do we fund? As citizens, we can vote, sign petitions, write letters and take part in campaigns – what choices do we make there? And as community members, we have conversations with one another, we respond to remarks made by family members, friends or random encounters. How committed are we to truth and justice there? Tolstoy wants us to consider our role in the broader structures we constitute, to see the connections between our behaviour and the impact of it through these structures, and where appropriate, to withdraw from these structures, to stop furthering evil but to exemplify alternatives instead.
Some will argue we cannot all make our own choices. The jobs on offer may not be many, for instance, and organic food comes at a price. Yet this is why Tolstoy’s remarks are address most pointedly towards the comfortable classes – those who have more freedom to make these choices. Those who are poor, uneducated and oppressed have only limited choices in those four realms, but the richest are much freer to choose. Indeed they often know, if not explicitly then at least deep down, that they are making choices which might hurt others. They might see those as deplorable or necessary, and they might note that the world is tough and will be do whatever they chose at their individual level. In other words and following Tolstoy, they might be deceiving themselves and desisting from their moral responsibilities. The higher up the pyramid of privileges, the harsher Tolstoy’s gaze will be. But some degree of choice, most of us have to some degree.

Besides, many revolutions have hinged on key defenders of the regime (the army, the upper-middle class, etc) opting to change allegiance, conceding the argument to revolutionaries and moving along with the broader public opinion. Such groups are not convinced but hardened by revolutionary violence, whereas nonviolent methods have more potential to convince. In other words, nonviolent activism is arguably tactically wiser.

**Conclusion**

It might be argued that Tolstoy was neither a Christian (because his thought strips away too many of its defining characteristics) nor an anarchist (because he seems to follow ‘revealed’ biblical authority). However, Tolstoy does arguably develop with remarkable logical consistency the radical pacifist implications of Jesus’ teaching with regards to collective violence. He is therefore Christian in the sense that his thought takes its cue from Jesus’ morality, and he is an anarchist in the sense that he rejected the state on that basis. Besides, Tolstoy does not believe in Jesus’ morality just because it is Jesus’ – rather, Jesus’ teaching and example inspired him to reflect on violence and how to minimise it. In other words, he is an anarchist as an extension of his pacifism, which itself is inspired by Jesus but founded on reason.

Tolstoy’s political musings do not amount to a full or systematic political theory. Rather, his writings are those of a political critic – a prophet, as it were. He plays a role analogous to the Socratic gadfly about violence and about the suffering inflicted by structures which we constitute and legitimise. The world has changed dramatically since 1910, and Tolstoy’s arguments are possibly a bit too categorical, but much of his diagnosis remains painfully accurate, even if his solutions are not necessarily more realistic today than in his days. Eccentric though his thoughts might be, they invite us to reconsider our role in the violence perpetrated upon others.

It might also be worth recalling that in the years that followed Tolstoy's death in 1910, both his native Russia and indeed the world witnessed conflagrations of violence of an industrial scale – precisely the sort of horrors which Tolstoy
feared. The Russian Revolution and other similar dictatorships illustrated what a Left-wing revolutionary transformation of society from the top down could lead to, and two World Wars illustrated the destruction which human beings justifying violent means to attain what in their eyes are laudable aims could lead to. In the unstable balance of power that followed the Cold War and 9/11, in a world facing considerable ecological challenges, the seemingly unstoppable proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and increasingly widening economic inequalities, the risks of violent conflagrations are arguably greater than in 1910. For that reason alone if for no other, Tolstoy’s eccentric yet still prophetic Christian anarchist thought remains worth reading and reflecting upon today.

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Leo Tolstoy’s Christian Anarchist Thought


