

Tolstoy and Practical Spirituality

Christian Bartolf

The Russian writer Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), the famous author of the novels *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, was on the verge of committing suicide by the end of 1879 because he saw the vanity of his life as a privileged Count. This deep crisis was the new beginning of a spiritual journey which made him the most ardent and outspoken advocate of resisters worldwide. His solidarity with the pacifist and vegetarian community of the Doukhobors (Spirit Wrestlers) and their spiritual leader Peter Verigin—the Doukhobors’ passage to Canadian exile across the Atlantic Ocean was largely paid by Leo Tolstoy who arranged for the royalties from his novel *Resurrection* to go to the migration fund: about RUB 30,000—led to the worldwide first example of a mass act of burning weapons in the year 1895. Leo Tolstoy’s concept of nonviolent non-cooperation as nonviolent resistance to injustice and violence, thus, became manifest to the international community and public so that we can consider the institutions of the Nobel Peace Prize (Oslo, Norway) and the International Peace Conference, The Hague, The Netherlands (Final Act, 29 July 1899) as immediate results of Tolstoy’s desperate efforts to bring meaning to his seemingly empty life.

C. Bartolf (✉)

Gandhi Information Center, Berlin, Germany

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After writing *My Confession* (1879), *My Religion* (1884), and *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* (1894), Tolstoy's split from the Russian Orthodox Church became obvious, and so he was excommunicated in 1901 because of his explicit criticism of the Church's dogmas. Thus, Tolstoy's active support of the Doukhobors, alongside that of the Quaker's and famous intellectuals like Peter Kropotkin, led to the inevitable foundation of a new spiritual religion which Tolstoy had already exposed in his work *The Gospel In Brief*, first published in German language ("Kurze Darlegung des Evangeliums," Leipzig 1892) which was banned and never published in Russia during his lifetime.

This German language translation of Leo Tolstoy's *The Gospel In Brief* (1892) had a profound influence on the famous philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951). During the early months of World War I, Wittgenstein's Austro-Hungarian regiment participated in the battles of Galicia with more than 600,000 casualties. Wittgenstein found Tolstoy's book in a small bookshop in Tarnow and started reading it on 1 September 1914. He read and reread it and thenceforth had it always with him, under fire and at all times. This book from which he could quote whole passages by heart literally kept Wittgenstein alive so that his fellow soldiers referred to him as the man with the gospels because Tolstoy fused all four gospels into one in *The Gospel In Brief*. Renunciation, liberation from passions, and voluntary simplicity in order to serve the spirit which is in every human being—and which makes all men "sons of God"—became the core Tolstoyan message in the eyes of Wittgenstein: One of his first steps after returning from the war was to give away the immense fortune he inherited upon his father's death in 1912. Great simplicity, at times frugality, became characteristic of Wittgenstein's life, according to Tolstoy's translation of Jesus Christ's message: "The kingdom of God is not in time, or in place, of any kind. It is like lightning, seen here, there, and everywhere. And it has neither time nor place, because the kingdom of God, the one which I preach, is within you."¹

At the conclusion of his work *The Gospel In Brief*, Leo Tolstoy found to his astonishment and joy that the Lord's Prayer is nothing less than Christ's teaching in nuce, stated in the most concise form—that is why Tolstoy arranged the chapters of his book accordingly²:

1. Our Father
2. Which art in Heaven
3. Hallowed be Thy name
4. Thy kingdom come

5. Thy will be done, as in heaven
6. So also on earth
7. Give us our daily bread
8. This day
9. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors
10. And lead us not into temptation
11. But deliver us from evil
12. For Thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory

In Tolstoy's explanation:

1. Man is the son of the Father.
2. God is the infinite spiritual source of life.
3. May the Source of Life be held holy.
4. May His power be established over all men.
5. May His will be fulfilled, as it is in Himself.
6. So also in the bodily life.
7. The temporal life is the food of the true life.
8. The true life is in the present.
9. May the faults and errors of the past not hide this true life from us.
10. And may they not lead us into delusion.
11. So that no evil may come to us.
12. And there shall be order, and strength, and reason.

Jesus' last words at the Calvary or Golgotha cross outside Jerusalem's walls: "It is finished! Father, I give up my spirit into your hands!" resumes the central concept of the gospels, stripped of what Tolstoy regarded as the Church's distortions and focus on dogma and ritual: the spirit. It is the spirit of nonviolent resistance to "brute force" through "soul force." It is the spirit of a nonviolent "war against war" to end all wars.

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Contrasting the Spanish-American War of 1898 with the Doukhobors' burning of the weapons in 1895, Tolstoy wrote about "Two Wars" (in: *The Clarion*, 19 November 1898)³: "The first—the Spanish-American war—was an old, vain, foolish, and cruel war, inopportune, out-of-date, barbarous, which sought by killing one set of people to solve the question as to how and by whom another set of people ought to be governed.

The other, which is still going on, and will end only when there is an end of all war, is a new, self-sacrificing, holy war, which was long ago proclaimed (as Victor Hugo expressed it at one of the congresses) by the best and most advanced—Christian—section of mankind against the other, the coarse and savage section. This war has recently been carried on with a special vigor and success by a handful of Christian people—the Doukhobors of the Caucasus—against the powerful Russian government.”

“The Russian government has made use of all the weapons it had at command—police measures for making arrests, for prohibiting people moving from place to place, for forbidding all intercourse with one another, the interception of letters, espionage, the prohibition to publish in the newspapers information about anything concerning the Doukhobors, calumnies of them printed in the papers, bribery, flogging, imprisonment, and the ruin of families.

The Doukhobors have, on their part, employed their one religious weapon, viz., gentle intelligence and patient firmness; and they say: ‘One must not obey man rather than God. Therefore, whatever you may do to us, we cannot and will not obey you.’

Men praise the heroes of the savage Spanish-American war, who, in their desire to distinguish themselves before the world, and to gain reward and fame, have slain great numbers of men, or have died while engaged in killing their fellow-creatures. But no one speaks or even knows about the heroes of the war against war, who—unseen and unheard—have died and are now dying under the rod, in foul prison cells or in painful exile, and who, nevertheless, to their last breath, stand firm by goodness and truth.”

“Christ said, ‘I have conquered the world.’ And indeed, He has conquered the world, if men would but learn to believe in the strength of the weapon given by Him.

And this weapon is the obedience of every man to his own reason and conscience. This, indeed, is so simple, so indubitable, and binding upon every man. ‘You wish to make me a participator in murder; you demand of me money for the preparation of weapons; and want me to take part in the organized assembly of murderers,’ says the reasonable man—he who has neither sold nor obscured his conscience. ‘But I profess that law—the same that is also professed by you—which long ago forbade not murder only, but all hostility, also, and therefore I cannot obey you.’

And it is just by this simple means, and by it alone, that the world is being conquered.”

The Doukhobors (from “Dukho-borets,” meaning “Spirit Wrestler”) was a dissident group in Russia which rejected the supremacy of the Church and the State since the seventeenth century. Arch-Bishop Amvrosii of Ekaterinoslav used this label in a negative way to describe people whom he and the Russian Orthodox Church saw as “wrestling against the Spirit.” The Doukhobors adopted this label as one that best reflects them as “wrestling *with* the Spirit of Truth.” In this way they converted the label to their very name. It was only under the autocracy of Tsar Alexander I in 1802 that the Doukhobors gained the legal status of subjects to the Tzar when they were invited to settle as model farmers on the Crimean Milky Waters *Molochnye Vody* region. The commune system (*mir*) of communal ownership of the land and equal land distribution gave them the basis to preserve their unique customs, traditions, and beliefs. Beginning in 1839, during the reign of Tsar Nicholas I, the Doukhobors chose exile in Tiflis and Elizavetpol areas of Transcaucasia, 2 kilometers above sea level with a shift from agriculture to cattle raising. When military service was introduced in Transcaucasia in 1887—in Russia it had been introduced in the year 1874—the Doukhobors practiced conscientious objection to military service. Peter V. Verigin, the head of the Large Party since 1886, was in Siberian exile when influenced by Leo Tolstoy’s “The Kingdom of God Is within You.” Verigin asked the Doukhobors to neither swear the oath to the Tsar Nicholas II nor drink alcohol, nor smoke, nor eat meat, nor associate with the military. Thus, the first public demonstration of civil disobedience took place on Easter 1895. Matvey Lebedev and the first ten Doukhobors threw down their rifles during their training in the Elizavetpol reserve battalion. Along with 60 other Doukhobors who followed their example, they were sent to a disciplinary battalion.

Then, one minute after midnight of June 29 (July 12), 1895, followed the first major mass act of arms burning in human history of altogether 7000 Doukhobor activists—a literal conversion of swords into ploughshares, at three chosen sites: one in Kars (now Turkey), one in Elizavetpol (now Azerbaijan), and one in the northern plateau of Georgia in the area of Bogdanovka⁴:

“All preparations were done secretly as Doukhobor men with horse-drawn wagons gathered weapons and placed them into a huge pile. To this they added wood sun-dried manure bricks in teepee style and sprinkled the whole

with kerosene before placing a match to it. Around the fire stood Doukhobor men and women, many wearing traditional colourful padded vests and padded headdress for the women covered with kerchiefs (platoks) singing psalms of peace and the coming of a new era in humanity.”

Captain Praga and 200 Cossacks used horse whips and then military whips against them, forcibly marched them 13 kilometers to the Governor, while the Doukhobors continued to sing psalms. When 300 Doukhobors handed in their reserve papers, Governor Nakashidze threatened them with death. Prince Ospinsky from St. Petersburg intervened dramatically in Bogdanovka, unsheathed his saber and threatened the Governor. The Cossacks were ordered to put away their guns. That was the beginning of severe beatings and floggings and the exile of 4600 Doukhobors to Gori, Signa, Tianeti, Dusheti, and Skra. Those reserve soldiers who refused to accept the gun and the oath as well as to go to church parade were treated harshly and exiled to Baku, Yerevan, and Elizavetpol. Many died before the world learned about them.

Preventing the imminent danger of genocide, Leo Tolstoy rushed to complete his novel *Resurrection* to assist the Doukhobors' passage to Canada. By publicizing the plight of the Doukhobors in Russia, he persuaded English Quakers and intellectuals like Prince Peter Kropotkin and Professor James Mavor (University of Toronto) to assist this humanitarian cause. In November 1897, Leo Tolstoy wrote an open letter to a Swedish newspaper editor to recommend the Caucasian Doukhobors or Spirit Wrestlers for the first Nobel Peace Prize because they “have best served the cause of peace.”⁵

“I know this means has already for long been practiced. I know how the ancient Christians who refused the military service were executed by the Romans for doing so (these refusals are described in the lives of the saints). I know how the Paulicians were, every one of them, destroyed for the same conduct. I know how the Bogomili were persecuted, and how the Quakers and Mennonites suffered for this same cause. I know also how, at the present time, in Austria, the Nazarenes are languishing in prisons; and how people have been martyred in Russia.

But the fact that all these martyrdoms have not abolished war in no way proves that they have been useless. To say that this means is not efficacious because it has already been applied for a long time and yet war still exists, is the same as to say that in spring the sun's warmth is not efficacious

because the ground has not yet become bare of snow, and flowers have not yet sprung up.

The meaning of these refusals in former times and now is quite different; then they were the first rays of the sun falling on the frozen winter earth, now they are the last touch of warmth necessary to destroy the remains of the seeming winter which has lost its power. And in fact there never was before that which now is; never before was the absurdity so evident that all men, without exception, strong and weak, disposed for war and abhorring it, should be equally obliged to take part in military service; or that the greater part of the national wealth should be spent on continually increasing military preparations; never before was it so clear as in our time that the continual excuse for the gathering and maintenance of armies—the supposed necessity of defense from an imaginary attack of enemies—has no basis in reason, and that all these threats of attack are only the invention of those to whom armies are necessary for their own purpose of maintaining power over the nations.

It has never occurred before, that war threatened man with such dreadful devastations and calamities, and such massacres of whole populations, as it does at the present time. And, lastly, never before have those feelings of unity and good-will among nations owing to which war appears to be something dreadful, immoral, senseless, and fratricidal, been so widely spread. But, above all never, as it is now, was the deceit so evident by which some people compel others to prepare for war, burdensome, unnecessary, and abhorrent to all.”

In 1899, one-third of the Doukhobors (7500 of the most persecuted ones) went by ship to Canada.

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In his “Letter on the Peace Conference” (The Hague, 1898)—we could recently celebrate the centenary of the Peace Palace (*Vredespaleis*) in The Hague, the Netherlands—Leo Tolstoy recalls how during the siege of Sevastopol during the Crimean War (October 1853–February 1856) he one day sat with the adjutants of Count Dmitriij Erofevič Osten-Sacken, Commander of the Russian garrison, when Prince Sergej Semenovič Urusov, a brave officer and first-rate chess player and a friend of Tolstoy’s, entered the room and wished to speak to the General. An adjutant took him to Osten-Sacken’s room, and ten minutes later Urusov passed out again, looking discontented. After he had gone, the adjutant explained

that Urusov had come to suggest that a challenge should be sent to the English to play a game of chess for the foremost trench in front of the Fifth Bastion: a trench that had changed hands several times and had already cost some hundreds of lives. Osten-Sacken had refused to issue the challenge provoking Tolstoy's comment:

“Undoubtedly it would have been far better to play chess for the trench than to kill people.”

And he concludes his nowadays almost unknown “Letter on the Peace Conference” (The Hague, 1898)⁶:

“With those who refuse military service on conscientious grounds, governments will always behave as the Russian government behaved with the Doukhobors. At the very time when it was professing to the whole world its peaceful intentions, it was (with every effort to keep the matter secret) torturing and ruining and banishing the most peaceable people in Russia, merely because they were peaceable, not in words only, but in deeds, and therefore refused to be soldiers...”

“Armies can be reduced and abolished only in opposition to the will, but never by the will, of governments.

Armies will only be diminished and abolished when people cease to trust governments, and themselves seek salvation from the miseries that oppress them, and seek that safety, not by the complicated and delicate combinations of diplomatists, but in the simple fulfillment of that law, binding upon every man, inscribed in all religious teachings, and present in every heart, not to do to others what you wish them not to do to you—above all, not to slay your neighbors.

Armies will first diminish, and then disappear, only when public opinion brands with contempt those who, whether from fear, or for advantage, sell their liberty and enter the ranks of those murderers, called soldiers; and when the men now ignored and even blamed—who, in despite of all the persecution and suffering they have borne—have refused to yield the control of their actions into the hands of others, and become the tools of murder—are recognized by public opinion, to be the foremost champions and benefactors of mankind. Only then will armies first diminish and then quite disappear, and a new era in the life of mankind will commence. And that time is near.”

NOTES

1. Leo Tolstoy: *The Gospel in Brief*. Translated by Isabel Hapgood; edited and with a preface by F.A. Flowers III (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), p. 62.
2. Leo Tolstoy: *The Gospel in Brief*. Translated by Isabel Hapgood; edited and with a preface by F.A. Flowers III (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), pp. 18 f.
3. Leo Tolstoy: "Two Wars," in: *Tolstoy's Writings on Civil Disobedience and Non-Violence* (New York: Signet Books—The New American Library—1968), pp. 18, 20 f. and 23.
4. We owe this detailed account to the research of the Canadian Doukhobor historian Koozma J. Tarasoff: "Doukhobor Survival through the Centuries," *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, Vol. XXVII, No. 3, 1995, Special Issue: The Doukhobors, pp. 5–10.
5. Leo Tolstoy: "Nobel's Bequest. A Letter Addressed to a Swedish Editor," in: *Tolstoy's Writings on Civil Disobedience and Non-Violence* (New York: Signet Books—The New American Library—1968), pp. 175–180.
6. Leo Tolstoy: "Letter on the Peace Conference," in: *Tolstoy's Writings on Civil Disobedience and Non-Violence* (New York: Signet Books—The New American Library—1968), pp. 116 and 118 f.