CHAPTER 8

Tolstoy and Cosmopolitanism

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Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) is known as the famous Russian writer, author of the novels *Anna Karenina*, *War and Peace*, *The Kreutzer Sonata*, and *Resurrection*, author of short prose like "The Death of Ivan Ilyich", "How Much Land Does a Man Need", and "Strider" (Kholstomer). His literary work, including his diaries, letters and plays, has become an integral part of world literature.

Meanwhile, more and more readers have come to understand that Leo Tolstoy was a unique social thinker of universal importance, a nineteenth- and twentieth-century giant whose impact on world history remains to be reassessed. His critics, descendants, and followers became almost innumerable, among them Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in South Africa, later called "Mahatma Gandhi", and his German-Jewish architect friend Hermann Kallenbach, who visited the publishers and translators of Tolstoy in England and Scotland (Aylmer Maude, Charles William Daniel, Isabella Fyvie Mayo) during the Satyagraha struggle of emancipation in South Africa. The friendship of Gandhi, Kallenbach, and Tolstoy resulted in an English-language correspondence which we find in the Collected Works

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A.K. Giri (ed.), *Beyond Cosmopolitanism*,
DOI 10.1007/978-981-10-5376-4_8

of both, Gandhi and Tolstoy, and in the Tolstoy Farm as the name of the second settlement project of Gandhi and Kallenbach in South Africa (near Johannesburg). Nowadays, the memory of these pioneers of nonviolent non-cooperation and nonviolent resistance for the emancipation of the Indian and Asian citizens in the British colony South Africa has been revitalized by the admirable work of Gandhi's grandchildren (children of Gandhi's sons Devdas and Manilal Gandhi) Arun, Sita, Ela, Gopalkrishna, Rajmohan and Ramachandra, late Narayan Desai, the son of Gandhi's secretary Mahadev, and many others who have recollected this precious tradition of nonviolence as an antidote to civil unrest, civil wars, and wars.

With respect to **Cosmopolitanism**, we find the following entry of Eric Brown and Pauline Kleingeld in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (23 February 2002–28 November 2006)—http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/cosmopolitanism/:

> The word 'cosmopolitan', which derives from the Greek word *kosmopolitês* ('citizen of the world'), has been used to describe a wide variety of important views in moral and socio-political philosophy. The nebulous core shared by all cosmopolitan views is the idea that all human beings, regardless of their political affiliation, are (or can and should be) citizens in a single community. Different versions of cosmopolitanism envision this community in different ways, some focusing on political institutions, others on moral norms or relationships, and still others focusing on shared markets or forms of cultural expression. [...] The philosophical interest in cosmopolitanism lies in its challenge to commonly recognized attachments to fellow-citizens, the local state, parochially shared cultures, and the like.

If we briefly try to access which contributions Tolstoy gave us in order to understand the challenge of a cosmopolitan world culture, we now choose these sources: his latest 1910 work *Path of Life* and two English-language passages in letters he wrote to citizens of India, which we find in the Collected Works of Leo Tolstoy.

Let us start with Tolstoy's testament *Path of Life*, the third and last of Tolstoy's wisdom books after *For Every Day* and *Cycle of Reading*, and let us summarize the core message of this little known source book which is a compilation of wise quotations during the ages not according to the calendar dates (as in *Cycle of Reading*), but according to message themes and topics—like a philosophical tract—a perspective of self-transformation to

achieve world transformation—a process of spiritual conversion or active repentance (*metanoia*, *teshuva*). This compilation of wisdom contains Tolstoy's free translations of sources of world literature and philosophy, reflections and thoughts of various authors from Buddha, Laozi to La Boétie, Thoreau, and Angelus Silesius—just to mention a few of those who inspired Tolstoy in such a way that he considered their insight and knowledge as a confirmation of his "non-resistance" philosophy (which means nonviolent non-cooperation with all institutions which are organized and with all people who act on the basis of injustice and violence).

Path of Life was written in a lucid, simple style, easy to comprehend, but hard to digest for all the readers since 1910. The headlines indicate the line of thought, a manifestation of ethical messages for our twenty-first century and beyond. These ethical principles have tremendous political and social implications which challenge our consciences. Certainly, we deserve to be challenged, although we have ignored the messages of so many philosophers and sages throughout the centuries, but we are responsible for mankind, in present and future. That is why we should not ignore Tolstoy's testament any longer. Maybe this suffices that we might understand the meaning of this central text—to begin with, it should be mentioned that you find the Russian text of *Path of Life* in volume 45 of the Jubilee Edition of the Complete Works of Tolstoy (90 volumes) and that the majority of these thoughts, derived from a "wide variety of authors, from Brahmin, Confucian, and Buddhist writings to the New Testament, epistles and many other, ancient as well as modern, thinkers" (Tolstoy), underwent some change as they were translated or excerpted so that Tolstoy himself was uncomfortable in citing the names of the authors while "the best of these unattributed thoughts are not [his], but belong to the world's greatest sages". (Tolstoy)—It seems that Tolstoy himself lost track of the original source of these "unattributed" quotations.

This said, we should first understand the structure of the text compilation by remembering the chapter headlines:

Chapter 1—Belief; Chapter 2—Soul; Chapter 3—One Soul in All; Chapter 4—God; Chapter 5—Love; Chapter 6—Sins, Temptations, Superstitions; Chapter 7—Gluttony; Chapter 8—Lust; Chapter 9—Sloth; Chapter 10—Greed; Chapter 11—Anger; Chapter 12—Pride; Chapter 13—Inequality; Chapter 14—Violence; Chapter 15—Punishment; Chapter 16—Vainglory; Chapter 17—"Superstition" of the Nation-State; Chapter

18—Pseudo-Religion; Chapter 19—Pseudo-Science; Chapter 20—Effort; Chapter 21—Living in the Present; Chapter 22—Inaction; Chapter 23—Words; Chapter 24—Thoughts; Chapter 25—Self-renunciation; Chapter 26—Humility; Chapter 27—Truthfulness; Chapter 28—Evil; Chapter 29—Death; Chapter 30—After Death; Chapter 31—Life—the Greatest Good.

Tolstoy began to write this last book on 31 January 1910, when he was 82 years of age, and he completed it in October of the same year a few days or weeks before he died. For 30 years, he developed and reworked the themes of his book. Chapters of *Path of Life* were originally published as separate booklets distilled from the book *For Every Day* by Ivan Ivanovich Gorbunov-Pasadov: "These booklets contain, in my opinion, the most important thoughts; in addition, the thoughts are set out in a particular order that is thematically significant" (Tolstoy, Letter to V. A. Posse from Kotchety, 10 September 1910). Tolstoy himself summarized his work *Path of Life* in a Foreword of which we represent here those passages which might contribute to a cosmopolitan world citizen perspective beyond the "sins (indulging the flesh), temptations (false definitions of one's good), or superstitions (false human teachings used to justify these sins and temptations)" of our centuries:

> […] 7. Sins that prevent people from union with other people and with God are as follows: *gluttony*, in other words, eating and drinking to excess.
>
> 8. The sin of *lust*, i.e., sexual excess.
>
> 9. The sin of *sloth*, i.e., not working to take care of one's own basic needs.
>
> 10. The sin of *greed*, i.e., obtaining and hoarding wealth for the purpose of using it to exploit the labor of other people.
>
> 11. And, worst of all, sins alienating us from other people: envy, fear, judging others, hostility, *anger*—in general, ill will towards other people. These sins prevent love from uniting the human soul with other creatures and with God. […]

When Tolstoy enumerates the four "temptations", he refers to what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. later called the "superiority complex", because these "temptations" lead people to "false ideas about interpersonal relationships", first of all "the sin of *pride*, which leads one to believe oneself superior to other people."

> […] 13. The temptation of *inequality*, in other words, the false idea that people can be divided into upper and lower classes.

> 14. The temptation of *violence*, in other words, the false idea that some people should have the right to use force to organize the lives of other people.
>
> 15. The temptation of *punishment*, in other words, the false idea that some people have the right to commit evil to obtain justice or to correct someone else's behavior.
>
> 16. The temptation of *vainglory*, in other words, the false idea that people's actions should be guided by human laws or societal opinion and not by their own reason and conscience. […]

Finally, Tolstoy explicitly refers to the "superstitions" serving as justifications for "temptations" and "sins", namely: the superstitions of *nation-state*, *church*, and *science*:

> […] 18. The "superstition" of the nation-state consists of believing that it is necessary and beneficial for a minority of idle people to govern the majority of working people. The Church "superstition" is that religious truth—which is always in the process of revealing itself—has been completely discovered for all time and that certain people, who have assumed the right to teach people the "true" faith, are in possession of a religious truth which has been expressed for once and for all time.
>
> 19. The Science "superstition" consists of believing that the only knowledge that is necessary is what has caught the attention and been arbitrarily selected from an infinite sphere of knowledge by a small number of people who have managed to avoid doing real work and who are therefore living immoral and irrational lives. […]

Those who combat sin, temptation, and superstition, attain happiness after their efforts which are, according to Tolstoy, always within the power of the individual—in the present moment, at a "timeless" point where the past meets the future, and the individual is always "free".

Tolstoy's "gospel of humility and renunciation"—which by the way paved the floor for Mahatma Gandhi for his communal settlement projects (Phoenix Settlement near Durban, and Tolstoy Farm near Johannesburg in South Africa) and for his political programme "Hind Svaraj, or: Indian Home Rule"—can be condensed this way: bread labour, diet reform, trusteeship, vegetarianism, voluntary simplicity—no drinks, drugs, and gambling—chastity (renunciation), sexual abstinence, if not possible: only monogamy, not polygamy, for the purpose of procreation—non-retaliation, non-possession, non-resistance, nonviolence: non-participation

in socio-economic exploitation of the miserable and poor by the rich and wealthy, non-participation in judicial courts, government offices, the military, and the religious institutions.

In Chapter 17 of *Path of Life* when Tolstoy compiles quotes against the "superstition" of the nation-state, he starts with Etienne de La Boétie's essay against "Voluntary Servitude": *Discours de la servitude volontaire* (or: "Against The One" meaning: against the dictator, absolute monarch or tyrant), but before he summarizes his principal objection against the nation-state:

> The false concept of the nation-state results from thinking of oneself as belonging only to one's own ethnic group or to one's own country separate from other ethnic groups and countries. People torture, kill, and rob others and themselves because of this terrible concept. A person only liberates himself from this misconception when he acknowledges life's spiritual principle, which is the same for everyone. Recognizing this principle, a person ceases to believe in human institutions that divide what God has united.

Following the basic thoughts of Montaigne's friend La Boétie (which might be the sixteenth-century blueprint for the concept of nonviolent non-cooperation expounded by Tolstoy and Gandhi by their very lives), Tolstoy gives a quote of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant about morality:

> When you examine carefully what people do with their lives, you cannot help but be amazed at how many lives are wasted on prolonging the kingdom of evil on earth and how the existence of individual countries and governments is the main contributor to this evil. It is even more amazing and upsetting when you realize that it is all so unnecessary and that people are inflicting all this evil on themselves out of good-natured stupidity by letting a few clever and wicked people rule over them.

And Blaise Pascal: "Can there be anything more absurd than the idea that a man living on the other side of the river has the right to kill me because his king is arguing with mine, even though I have no quarrel with him?"

When Tolstoy refers to the "superstition" of inequality which "elevates state officials over other people", he quotes at length Niccolò Machiavelli's masterpiece *The Prince*, and—Montesquieu: "It is amazing how easily a king believes he is everything, and how firmly the people believe they are

nothing," before summing up himself: "The chief evil of the government apparatus is not that it destroys lives but that it destroys love and incites disunity among people."

Tolstoy regards "the nation-state as a transitional form of communal living" following the inspiration of "enlightened anarchy" (Gandhi) and the vision of Ernest Howard Crosby: "The nation-state is a temporary institution and must disappear. The swords and rifles we use today will be exhibited in museums as curiosities, the way we now exhibit instruments of torture."

Such a museum can be visited in my birthplace Luebeck near Hamburg in Germany where you find a museum about medieval torture in the city's emblematic landmark "Holstentor"; such a museum can be found in Berlin in the shape of an anti-war museum inspired by Tolstoy and one of his followers, Ernst Friedrich, who was an activist of "Never Again War" or "War against War" movements between the world wars. In this anti-war museum, the Berlin Gandhi Information Center (Research and Education for Nonviolence; registered society for peace education) could present sixteen exhibitions about nonviolent resistance during the past five years: Gandhi, Tagore, Tolstoy, Ruskin, Thoreau, King, Schweitzer, Ossietzky, Tucholsky, Kraus, Borchert, Erasmus, La Boétie, and the pacifist and vegetarian community of the Doukhobors (Spirit Wrestlers) who burnt their weapons in the Caucasus 1895, for which they were exiled to Canada after being nominated by Tolstoy for the first Nobel Peace Prize as early as the *fin de siècle* of the nineteenth century!

With respect to **India**, we finally listen to two of Tolstoy's Yasnaya Polyana letter passages concerning his appreciation for the Bhagavad Gita and the meaning of Krishna.

1. In his letter (dated 3 February 1908) to S. R. Chitali (first published in: Tolstoi und der Orient. Briefe und sonstige Zeugnisse ueber Tolstois Beziehungen zu den Vertretern orientalischer Religionen; (ed. Pavel Ivanovitch Biriukov) Rotapfel Verlag, Zuerich und Leipzig, 1925, p. 49), Tolstoy wrote:

> I was sorry to see that you think I do not agree with the fundamental principle of the Bhagavad-Gita that man should direct all his spiritual force only to his duty, or as I express it—to his life, to love and not think of the consequences, knowing that if he lives on this principle the results for himself and for the world will be the best possible. I firmly believe this and always try to

remember it and to act accordingly myself, and say it to those who ask my opinion and express it in my writings. If my conception of life is truly religious I cannot think otherwise, for this principle is the foundation of religion. And religion, true religion is and always has been one and the same everywhere.

2. In his letter (dated 3/16 February 1907) to Baba Premanand Bhârati, the author of "Shree Krishna. The Lord of Love." (New York, 1904) (first published in: Tolstoi und der Orient. Briefe und sonstige Zeugnisse ueber Tolstois Beziehungen zu den Vertretern orientalischer Religionen (ed. Pavel Ivanovitch Biriukov); Rotapfel Verlag, Zuerich und Leipzig, 1925, pp. 31–33), Tolstoy wrote:

[…] The metaphysical religious idea of the doctrine of Krishna […] is the eternal and universal foundation of all true philosophies and all religions. The truth that the principle of all that exists we cannot otherwise feel and understand than as Love and that the soul of man is an emanation of this principle, the development of which is what we call human life—is a truth that is more or less consciously felt by every man and therefore accessible to the most scientifically developed minds as well as to the most simple. This truth is the foundation of the religion of Krishna and of all religions. But in the religion of Krishna, as well as in all ancient religions, there are statements which not only cannot be proved, but which are clearly products of uncontrolled imagination and which, moreover, are quite unnecessary for the conception of the essential truth and the affirmation of rules of conduct which flow out of the fundamental principle.

Such are all the cosmological and historical affirmations of creations, durability of the world, all the stories of miracles, the theory of the four ages and the immoral and contradictory to the fundamental principle organization of castes.

Dear friend and brother, the task which is before you is to state the truth common to all men, which can and must unify the whole humanity in one and the same faith, and one and the same rule of conduct based on it. Humanity must unite in one and the same faith, because the soul of every man—as you know it—only seems to be multiple and different in every individual, but is one in all beings. And therefore, dear brother, I think that you ought to put aside your national traditions and likings and expose only the great universal truth of your religion.

Abnegation is necessary not only in individual likings but also in national partialities. We must sacrifice our national, poetical likings to the great goal

that we have before us: to attain and confess the main truth, which alone can unify all men.

To work at this great goal is, as I think, your vocation and your duty.

I tried for many years to work in this direction and if the remnants of my life can be good for anything, it is only for the same work. Will we work together for it?

Your brother, and I hope your co-worker,

Leo Tolstoy.