

Contribution

Tolstoy and Gandhi

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Abstract: This article is based on an analysis of the correspondence between Leo Tolstoy and Mahatma Gandhi consisting of seven letters written in 1909–10. It examines their shared outlook on the role of violence and non-violence in private and public life. It shows that, despite their different religious and cultural backgrounds, different national traditions and the dissimilarity of their personal lives, they were very close in their global vision and moral outlook. They were united by an inner and steadfast dedication to the idea of non-violence. Non-resistance to evil by force, which is an adequate presentation of love according to Tolstoy, and the concept of Satyagraha, which is a positive formula of passive resistance according to Gandhi, are identical concepts. Both thinkers considered the specific conditions of India's struggle for national liberation against British rule not to be an argument permitting deviation from the principle of non-violence. *A Letter to a Hindu*, in which Tolstoy develops the ideas of his treatise *The Law of Love and The Law of Violence*, assumed the character of a programme document for the non-violent struggle of the Hindus (Indians) against the colonialists in South Africa. Tolstoy and Gandhi are at one in thinking that non-violence as a social position is a consequence, expression and development of an individually responsible personal religious and moral life choice. They listed a number of basic virtues of non-violent life philosophy for the individual. The first step is a chaste repression of the bodily desires starting with vegetarianism. The virtues also include manual labour, fearlessness and uncompromising truthfulness. A radical critique of material civilization is another point of convergence in their views. In the article, I show Gandhi's thought to be an evolution and new stage of Tolstoy's teachings. It extends the idea of non-violence to the political and social spheres.

Key words: Leo Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi, non-resistance, Satyagraha, The Law of Love, *A Letter to a Hindu*, vegetarianism, and the critique of civilization

Introduction

THE fact of correspondence between Tolstoy and Gandhi, which this article explores, is in itself remarkable. In the first place, the fact that two total strangers from opposite ends of the world — Russia and South Africa — corresponded with each other is extraordinary. No matter how famous Tolstoy was and no matter how vast the network of people he corresponded with, the range of his personal contacts must have been physically limited (recall here that he never personally met or corresponded with his famous fellow countryman and contemporary, Dostoyevsky). It also seems altogether unbelievable that an obscure Indian like Gandhi was destined to broaden the scope and advance Tolstoy's own cause **as a thinker and social activist**. It was an extremely fortunate page in history imbued with symbolic meaning. It was as if fate had deliberately engineered it to keep the flame of non-violence burning for it to pass like a baton from one pair of hands to another, from Tolstoy to Gandhi.

The Pursuit of Truth

Letters between Two Thinkers

Leo N. Tolstoy and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi exchanged seven letters in all.

Gandhi wrote his first letter to Tolstoy on October 1, 1909, introducing himself as “a person absolutely unknown to you”.¹ The letter is in three parts. In the first, Gandhi acquaints Tolstoy with the discrimination against the Indian community in South Africa. He tells him that the situation had become particularly adverse after a law was adopted several years earlier limiting Asians' rights of residence and movement and that they had responded to the situation by launching a campaign of passive resistance to uphold their rights. Gandhi informed Tagore that he and some of his friends were conducting this campaign firmly based on the principle of non-resistance to evil. He himself, he writes, had read the works of Tolstoy, which had exerted a profound impact on his worldview. Next, Gandhi seeks Tolstoy's opinion on whether organizing a public writing competition on the theme of morality and the effectiveness of passive resistance would help promote these ideas amongst the people at large. Last, he raises some questions in connection with the publication and distribution of Tolstoy's *A Letter to a Hindu*. Tolstoy makes a note in his diary on September 24 (the dates differ because Tolstoy uses old style): “[I] [h]ave just been writing

a letter to a Hindu (Indian) and have received a pleasant letter from a Hindu from Transvaal.”²

Tolstoy's reply dated October 7, 1909 is very friendly and very brief. He welcomes their struggle: “May God bless all our dear brothers and comrades in Transvaal. This fight between gentleness and brutality, that is, between humility and love on one side, and conceit and violence on the other, has spread more widely here, too. Especially conflicts between religious obligations and the laws of the State worsen through the conscientious objection to rendering military service. Such objections are taking place more and more frequently.”³ Tolstoy wrote that he was glad his *A Letter to a Hindu* had been translated and distributed and answers all Gandhi's questions connected with it.

Gandhi's second letter of April 9, 1909 is very brief. He refers to his previous letter and asks Tolstoy to accept his new pamphlet (*Indian Home Rule* or *Hind Swaraj* written in 1909 to present his views) from his “humble follower”.⁴ The pamphlet was originally written in Gujarati but all its copies were confiscated by the Indian government, which prompted Gandhi to quickly translate it. Gandhi expresses with due reverence his hope that a critical review of this pamphlet would be forthcoming. Simultaneously, he sends two copies of *A Letter to a Hindu*. Tolstoy answers on April 25 (May 8) through a brief letter that he has read the book with interest and considers passive resistance to be an issue “of the greatest importance not only for India but for the whole mankind”. He promises that as soon as his health permits he would write to Gandhi everything he would like “to say about your [Gandhi's] book and all your [Gandhi's] work”.⁵

In a letter of August 15, 1910, Gandhi thanks Tolstoy for his encouraging and kind letter and that he looked forward to a more detailed review of his *Indian Home Rule*. At the same time, Gandhi introduces his friend and co-worker, German architect Kallenbach who, powerfully influenced by Tolstoy's works, had chosen the path advocated by him and endured many of the hardships so vividly described in *A Confession*. Gandhi expresses his support for Kallenbach who permitted himself to name his farm Tolstoy Farm. Attached to the letter are several issues of the weekly newspaper *Indian Opinion*, describing their joint project with Kallenbach. Kallenbach writes a separate letter to Tolstoy apologizing retrospectively for having used Tolstoy's name. He writes about the profound influence of the works and teachings of Tolstoy which led him to name the 1100-acre farm that he had placed at the disposal of the non-resistance fighters and their families after Tolstoy. At the end of the letter, justifying himself,

Kallenbach writes to Tolstoy that he would try to “live according to the ideas that you are so fearlessly introducing to the world”. Tolstoy’s diary has this entry dated September 6, 1910: “Pleasant news from Transvaal about the colony of non-resisters.”⁶ Apparently, the letters and issues of *Indian Opinion* that he received from Gandhi and Kallenbach made a strong impression on Tolstoy. In spite of his emotional troubles and poor health, he started writing his answer to Gandhi on the same day. On September 6 and 7, he dictated the letter to D.P. Makovitsky (personal physician of the Tolstoy family and secretary), edited it and immediately sent it to V.G. Chertkov, prominent Tolstoyan and editor of Tolstoy’s works, for translation. A week later, on September 14, he received the completed translation and signed it.

Tolstoy’s last letter to Gandhi,⁷ dated September 7 (September 20 in new style), 1910, was a comprehensive summary of his views on non-resistance of the modern world, including the activities of Gandhi’s supporters in Transvaal. It was, in essence, Tolstoy’s response to what was reported about non-resistance supporters in the copies of *Indian Opinion* that he had received. It does not appear like a private letter at all. It was more like a manifesto which he sought to convey to people and leave behind, especially “now that [when] I am aware of the approach of death”.⁸ The letter is undoubtedly expressing an aspect of his thought that is central to his world view — non-resistance to evil. Tolstoy himself was not pleased with his letter. He wrote to Chertkov on September 17: “I have read the translation of the letter to Gandhi [as spelled in original]. What I do not like is not the translation but the style of the letter. Well, it cannot be helped, I could do no better.”⁹ In the event, Tolstoy broke his usual habit and made hardly any corrections to the letter. The letter does lack sophistication, but for that precise reason that it directly expresses a cry from Tolstoy’s soul.

Tolstoy’s letter reached Gandhi after a long time. It was Chertkov who sent the letter on Tolstoy’s instruction. He writes, “Tolstoy is extending his cordial greetings and warm wishes for success in your cause to you and your co-workers.”¹⁰ Tolstoy was also interested in the news about Kallenbach, and Chertkov also attached a separate letter to Kallenbach on Tolstoy’s instruction. Tolstoy’s letter to Gandhi would be published in a friendly journal of London with Tolstoy’s permission and the issue containing the letter would be delivered to Gandhi. Chertkov told his assistant A.D. Zirnits to send the original letter to Gandhi. However, Tolstoy’s letter was sent only on November 1 due to Zirnits falling ill. “Gandhi received the letter in Transvaal a few days before Tolstoy’s death. He did not have time to reply.”¹¹ Gandhi made

his own translation of the letter (he seemed not happy with Chertkov’s translation) and published it with an obituary of Tolstoy in *Indian Opinion* on November 26, 1910.¹² He reprinted this letter in a special issue in 1914 to commemorate the victory of South African Indians in their struggle for civil rights. With the portrait of Tolstoy, the issue also reminds readers that this great Russian writer was one of the guiding spirits of the struggle which lasted from 1906 to 1914.¹³

There is another important thing to note in connection with Chertkov’s letter written to Gandhi at Tolstoy’s behest. As mentioned earlier, in his first letter, Gandhi had especially sought Tolstoy’s advice concerning the idea of a public writing competition on the theme of morality and passive resistance. But Tolstoy’s reply didn’t address this. However, indirectly answering Gandhi’s question of the first letter, Chertkov recommended that Gandhi meet Mrs Mayo, Tolstoy’s and Chertkov’s common friend and well-known writer of England, who could write about the movement of Gandhi and his friends and thus draw attention to their work. This can be taken to mean that Tolstoy regarded a public discussion on moral issues as fruitful, if it unfolded in the mode of non-resistance.

The Law of Love: What Is the Truth for Tolstoy

Let us start with *A Letter to a Hindu* to discuss the views of Tolstoy and Gandhi and the relationship of their views. It is not only because the letter prompted Gandhi to write his first letter to Tolstoy (Gandhi had copies of the anonymous text. Hoping to publish it in his newspaper, Gandhi wrote to confirm that Tolstoy was indeed its author and to ask the source of Krishna’s words used in the epigraph). More important is the fact that Tolstoy expressed his view on the effectiveness of non-resistance in the struggle of Indian people against British enslavement even before he became acquainted with Gandhi and his idea of passive resistance.

On May 24, 1908, Tolstoy received a letter from Indian journalist Taraknath Das, who was based in the United States of America. It said that Tolstoy had earned everyone’s respect through his struggle against the enslavement of the Russian people, but that Indian people were suffering even more from the oppression of the British government. Das asked Tolstoy “to write at least an article on India and thus express your views on India in the name of the hungry millions”.¹⁴ In addition, Das sent Tolstoy several issues of his journal, *Free Hindustan*. Tolstoy started writing his answer to the letter on June 7 and worked on it for three days. After “breaking off” (as he notes in his diary), he resumed his writing in August. Having received a reminder from Das in October,

he again worked on the letter from November 17 to December 14. His diary entries for November 28 and December 6 record that he worked on the letter on these dates, and that for December 14 notes: "Finished my letter to the Hindu".¹⁵

D.P. Makovitsky, who helped Tolstoy prepare the letter, wrote in his diary on June 7: "I would like to abridge the article 'There Is an End to Everything', said L.N., and to send it. They [Hindu] seek the right to take part in the government, that is, they reinforce the violence perpetrated against them".¹⁶ In this way, Tolstoy pointed out that the Indian journalist and his friends were making the mistake of playing with the British oppressors by their own rules. Therefore, Tolstoy intended to elevate his article to a higher level in defence of the Indian people and to discuss the extent to which people could resort to violent means in the struggle for their ideals. Tolstoy tried to use a shortened version of treatise 'The Law of Love and the Law of Violence' (the tentative title was 'There Is an End to Everything') as a base of his new article (completed in July 1908). *A Letter to a Hindu* sticks to the idea that the law of violence and the law of love are mutually exclusive choices. Even if there is a case for a certain dialectics in past history, Tolstoy rules it out in the context of the present and presents it as a choice between one or the other.

Tolstoy writes that he has always wondered why a majority of labour always submitted themselves to only a limited number of [upper] people, which seems especially strange to him in case of India, where "more than two hundred million people, highly gifted both physically and mentally, find themselves under the power of a small group quite alien to them in thought and immeasurably inferior to them in religious morality".¹⁷ He saw no other reason for this except that these Hindu people had been misguided by their leaders on to the false path of an anti-religious and immoral social system followed east to west by all the people from Japan to England and America. He went on to say that the history of humanity had always been accompanied by violence, but a universal thought was already emerging among the different civilizations thousands of years ago. It taught that every individual manifests a spiritual element that gives life and unites everything through love. This thought is embraced in "Brahmanism, Judaism, Mazdaism (the teachings of Zoroaster), Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and in the Greco-Roman writings, as well as in Christianity and Mohammedanism (Islam). The mere fact that this thought sprang up among different nations and at different times indicates that it is inherent in human nature and contains the truth."¹⁸ At

the same time, this thought was distorted by authorized religions to suit the interests of the rulers. As religion lost its strength, it was replaced by scientific prejudice claiming the eternity and natural character of violence, the imminence of cleansing society of certain elements. The entire Brahmanical and Buddhist world and the Confucian world followed the path of violence pursued by European civilization. Tolstoy writes that the epigraph, proposed by Das in his magazine as a slogan for the Indian people: "Resisting aggression is not only legal, but necessary, non-resistance harms both altruism and egoism",¹⁹ was in fact contrary to the truth. According to Tolstoy: "Love that allows violent resistance to evil is an internal contradiction,"²⁰ and "[It is true that the] Hindu was enslaved by not the English but the Hindus themselves." He continued:

[If one were to be guided by the law of love,] a [h]undred people would be unable to enslave a million people, and a million people would not enslave even a single individual. Do not resist evil, but do not make yourselves participate in evil, in the oppression of the administration, the courts, collection of levies and most importantly, the army and then no one in the world will enslave you.²¹

Tolstoy asserted that all humanity is at a stage where it, and even every individual, must choose which path to follow and decide what they need most. He added:

What the Indian, the Englishman, the Frenchman, the German, and the Russian wanted are neither Constitutions nor Revolutions, nor all sorts of Conferences and Congresses, nor the many ingenious devices for submarine navigation and aerial navigation, nor all sorts of conveniences to add to the enjoyment of the rich and ruling classes, nor new schools and universities with innumerable faculties of science, nor an augmentation of papers and books, nor gramophones and cinematographs, nor those childish and for the most part corrupt stupidities termed art. But only one thing is needed. It is knowledge of the simple and clear truth which finds place in every soul that is not stupefied by religious and scientific superstitions — the truth that for our life one law is valid — the law of love, which brings the highest happiness to every individual as well as to all mankind.²²

Tolstoy ended with the words of Krishna, whose pronouncements he used as epigraphs to his letter: "Children, look upwards with your beclouded eyes."²³

Ideas of Non-violence

Tolstoy in Accord with Gandhi

As already stated, Tolstoy felt Indian leaders were leading the people on to the false path of violence, resulting in their further enslavement rather than emancipation, and clearly stated his critical position on this matter in *A Letter to a Hindu*. At this juncture, it was very satisfactory for him to learn about an Indian like Gandhi whose views matched his own. As we see from Tolstoy's diary entries, the second letter and the book that he received from Gandhi raised his deep interest.

On April 19 when he received the letter, he jotted down this remark: "[T]wo Japanese²⁴ came in the morning. Savages dazzled by the sight of European civilization. By contrast, the book and letter from the Hindu express an understanding of all the shortcomings of European civilization and even its total worthlessness." On April 20, the diary says:

I read Candhi [as spelled by Tolstoy] about civilization in the evening. Very good. Here are things to note:

- 1) Moving forward slowly through the steps of generations. To make one step, a whole generation needs to die out. Masters, in general the rich who parade their wealth need to die out. Revolutionaries, who do not suffer from the discrepancy between life and consciousness but are guided solely by the vanity of the revolution as a profession, need to die out. How important it is to bring up children — the next generations!
- 2) The Japanese adopt Christianity as an attribute of civilization. Will they manage, like our Europeans, to make Christianity harmless so that it does not destroy what they derive from civilization?
- 3) The vast majority lives only an animal life. It blindly follows public opinion on issues of humanity.
- 4) The effort of thinking, like the seed from which a big tree grows, is invisible. But growing out of it [thinking], the changes will be visible in people's lives.

In these Tolstoy's judgements on the prospects of education based on the principle of non-resistance and the gradual development of the idea in society, his personal impressions of the Westernized Japanese he met intertwined with his reflections on Gandhi's book. He compared thought

to an invisible seed, from which a large tree grows, and here he seemed to be directly prompted by Gandhi's lines: "The seed is never seen. It works underneath the ground, is itself destroyed, and the tree which rises above the ground is alone seen."²⁵ The image of a seed from which springs life was apparently very close to the advocates of non-violence who had to work in an environment lacking understanding of the idea.

The April 21 entry reads: "Read a book about Gandhi. A very important book. I ought to write to him."²⁶

On the same day, Tolstoy also writes to Chertkov, "[A] Hindu thinker and fighter against British rule, Gandhi, whose method is Passive Resistance. A person very close to us, to me... He seeks my opinion on his book. I would like to reply to him in detail. Would you translate my letter for him?"²⁷ A note by D.P. Makovitsky states:

Gandhi, Tolstoy said, is the author of the book, *Indian Home Rule*. He is the head of the party fighting against England. He spent time in prison. I have earlier received a book about him. It is an extremely interesting book. It is a profound indictment of the whole European civilization from the viewpoint of a religious Hindu. [The book shows] [h]ow he came to London, how he started eating meat, and how he learnt to dance and adopted civilization. The war begins in South Africa. He has contempt for the attitude of white people against the "coloureds". In addition, he preaches that the most effective counter action is passive [resistance].²⁸

Influence of Tolstoy: Gandhi's Idea of Non-violence

Gandhi admitted that Tolstoy exerted a powerful influence on his life. He wrote: "Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* overwhelmed me. It left an abiding impression on me."²⁹ He referred to this book once again on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Tolstoy's birth: "Its reading cured me of my skepticism and made me a firm believer in Ahimsa..." In the same breath, he spoke of Tolstoy's importance: "For inculcating this true and higher type of Ahimsa amongst us, Tolstoy's life with his ocean-like love should serve as a beacon light and a never-failing source of inspiration."³⁰ In Gandhi's *Indian Home Rule*, there is a small list of 20 titles of "authoritative works", with the first six of which are by Tolstoy (in English): *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, *What Is Art?*, *The Slavery of Our Times*, *The First Step*, *What Then Must We Do?* and *A Letter to a Hindu*.

Gandhi frequently spoke of Tolstoy with reverence as a person to learn from. Yet, Gandhi cannot be described as a follower of Tolstoy,

nor can he be associated with a certain tradition, school or teacher. Of course, Gandhi was exposed to many intellectual and human influences and absorbed ideas from a lot of books, though probably not as many as Tolstoy. Compared to Tolstoy, his life was in general less dramatic and contradictory and his process towards non-violence was perhaps less of trial and error. On the other hand, Gandhi arrived at the principle of non-violence through neither books nor universities, nor in search of his own academic and business position. There is similarity in this between Tolstoy and him. It would not be correct to say that Gandhi came to the truth of non-violence all by himself, the same way as, for example Einstein discovered the theory of relativity. For Gandhi, non-violence is not one of many truths but the truth itself, and “non-violence” is the only one truth and it does not need to be defined.

Gandhi did not derive the idea of non-violence from books but just sighted it. When he was asked whether there were any examples from history that proved the validity of non-violence (non-resistance or passive resistance) as spiritual strength or strength of the truth, he replied: “This appears to me to be a scientific truth. I believe in it as much as I believe in two and two being four.”³¹ Then, he formulated his famous thesis: “The Universe would disappear without the existence of that force.”³² He realized this truth in the process of religious inquiry, and it became his main religious experience. Gandhi left India for the glittering world of European culture in his youth, exposing himself to diverse beliefs and grappling with questions of identity. He states at this time:

I am Hindu by faith, but yet I do not know much about Hinduism, and I know much less of other religions. In fact, I do not know what is and what should be my belief, I intend to make a careful study of my own religion, and as far as I can, of other religions as well.³³

He was open to all beliefs and tested them on his own. In this way, he sought answers to questions of life. He tried to search for his self within Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, theosophy, Protestantism and Quakerism. Every faith struck a chord in his heart, but at the same time, he found something lacking. For instance, he was close to Hinduism by birth and education, but he found the idea of untouchability unacceptable. Christ’s Sermon on the Mount made an indelible impression on him, but he could not accept the idea of atonement for sins. He came to the conclusion that all religions head for the same destination through various paths. Each religion differs from others in various outward

manifestations but all have a common core. This core is love, which emerges in the most direct and purest form through self-denial and non-resistance to violence. According to Gandhi, while ahimsa is itself essential to the world and expresses what the world should be like, violence is an “interruption of the even working of the force of love” in public life and in history.³⁴ Tolstoy fully agrees with Gandhi that love is truth and it is evident to everyone. He says, “[Love is] the only law of human life and every person knows and feels this deep down [as most recognizable if we see children].”³⁵

Path of Non-violent Resistance

Non-violence, Love and Satyagraha

Tolstoy considers non-resistance to be the most exact and unadulterated expression of love. Gandhi also eventually equated passive resistance with the power of love and introduced the unique concept of ‘Satyagraha’. Love as the fundamental law of life means that the spiritual force of love prevails over physical coercion and the fear of death, and it links with self-sacrifice in an organic way. This law is inherent in each person as a sign of divine origin, and everyone has to find it within and to follow it. In his letter to Gandhi, Tolstoy cites the example (which he got to know) of a student of a girls school being tested by the presiding archbishop. On being asked whether God’s law always, in all cases, forbade murder, she answered simply, “Always.” The answer was not what she had been taught, the template answer being that murder is allowed under conditions of war and for executing criminals. In spite of all the arguments and sophistry of the examiner, the student stood her ground asserting that murder is always a sin just like any evil deed against others. The archbishop had to fall silent and the student emerged victorious. What is important here is not the arguments the student tried to marshal in favour of love and non-violence, they are evident to every person, but the decision she made to follow the voice of her conscience.

Both Tolstoy and Gandhi believed that love (non-violence, Satyagraha) is not confined to acquiring a set of knowledge and perceptions. For them, love is not what others do or ought to do, but what one ought to do on one’s own for boundless moral improvement. Tolstoy writes that he had thought one should seek to correct the life of others, but he was mistaken. Instead, he continues, “[Important is] renouncing the consciousness of one’s righteousness, one’s advantages and peculiarities compared with other people and recognizing

one's guilt".³⁶ Gandhi expressed the idea as a key to Satyagraha and characterized it as "the method of securing rights by personal suffering".³⁷ We humans find the law of love within ourselves. It extends to infinity of moral improvement. We do not know where it leads but we know what it begins with.

Ascetic Self-moderation

The first step is to control one's own body. This includes various practices from chastity in the broadest sense to vegetarianism and simple diet and the suppression of one's sexual drive. Tolstoy's and Gandhi's views were in total accord here. Although they did not know it of each other, interestingly both had been influenced by H. Williams's book on vegetarianism.³⁸ Gandhi fell under his influence in London when he opted for vegetarianism. Tolstoy provided a preface to the Russian edition of Williams's book in the shape of a full-length article entitled, 'The First Step'. It can be said that Gandhi went much further and perhaps more consistently than Tolstoy in terms of experimentation with his own body. Thinking of his body as nothing more than a temporary refuge for the soul, he minimized his diet, fasted and went on hunger strikes frequently. When he faced with a choice between bodily health and purity of soul, he always chose the latter and never wavered in his religious beliefs. (In his autobiography he describes the situation when he himself, as well as his wife and his son sharing his faith, hovered between life and death, but refused meat broth against the advice of his doctors.). Gandhi's widely known and successful experimentation with Brahmacharya, is especially remarkable.³⁹ Gandhi believed that the sexual instinct was meant only for procreation. As he already had three sons at the age of 37, he took a vow of further sexual abstention with the consent of his wife, and kept it scrupulously. In addition, thanks to a special diet and bodily exercise, he successfully got rid of sexual desire altogether.

Neither Tolstoy nor Gandhi considered himself to be a virtuous person or saint. On the contrary, both were basically aware of their imperfection as human beings. That is why they believed that they were not fit to judge others. (A striking example is when two pupils of his community misconducted, Gandhi decided to punish himself and imposed upon himself "a fast for seven days, and vowed to have only one meal a day for a period of four months and a half".⁴⁰ Whenever they talked of themselves, it was to admit their own faults and weaknesses, not to tell heroic tales glorifying their lives. Gandhi and Tolstoy saw their own lives as individual cases and not as particular manifestation of a human being in general. It was enough for both that each of them

in one's own way was deeply aware of his own imperfections and was guided by that in his own life, even though he might be supposed to be the worst human exemplar. They did not adopt the common norms that society at large followed. They found a moral law within themselves as a guide just as every person finds his/her heart beating inside his/her body. If there could be any lesson to learn from lives and words of Tolstoy and Gandhi, it would not consist in humanism. They teach that human beings live not for themselves but for God, or rather, human beings live not for their own well-being as animals but for the divinity inherent within them, that is, for self-denial. They did not claim to know what God was like. According to Tolstoy, "God as the beginning of everything cannot be grasped by reason."⁴¹ Gandhi also makes a similar point: "I have not seen Him, neither have I known Him. I have made the world's faith in God my own."⁴² Tolstoy and Gandhi share not only their moral conviction in non-violent resistance against violence, but also an understanding that this conviction is an expression of the divinity within human beings. Ascetic self-moderation is just the first step on that path.

Non-violent Resistance against the Evil of Violence

The first step sets the direction to be followed by other steps. Non-resistance against evil unfolds as a coherent way of life itself (as the first step of asceticism is taken). The teachings of Tolstoy and Gandhi are strikingly similar in terms of the main virtues they promote. It is truly remarkable that both belonged to such disparate environments in cultural, religious and national as well as personal terms, they had such different biographies, family traditions and intellectual influences, but the fact of this concurrence itself can then be seen as one argument that proves the truth of their teachings. The first code of non-resistance is to relinquish personal property because no one can take anything with them at the time of leaving this world, to earn a living by one's own labour, to cultivate courage within oneself and not be afraid of anything, because God is always with the followers of non-resistance, never to lie ("academic questions such as whether a man may not lie in order to save a life... arise, but these questions occur only to those who wish to justify lying"⁴³).

All these virtues are personal milestones on the path of non-resistance. One should keep in mind that Tolstoy and Gandhi believed that there was evil in this world, not evil people. Human beings face the evil of violence because by the fact of their animal life they immerse themselves in the world of violence. However, they never encounter evil people because the spiritual essence of human life is itself love, non-violence. Therefore, once they embark on the journey of non-violence,

they will declare battle against themselves, against the evil that lurks in their own hearts, opening their hearts to all their fellow human beings and reaching out to them. If somebody had been an evil-doer for Tolstoy, that would have been Tsar Nicholas II, who was considered by most to be an embodiment of evil. Even so, Tolstoy addresses his letter to the Tsar with the words “Dear brother”. If somebody had been an evil-doer for Gandhi during World War II, that would have been Adolf Hitler, but Gandhi’s letter to Hitler begins with “Dear friend”. Furthermore, seeming to argue with those displeased with such a salutation in the first letter, he follows it up by clarifying in a second letter that such an address is not a mere formality.

In a comparison of Tolstoy and Gandhi, Romain Rolland writes: “The most manifest similarity between these two people and the influence of Tolstoy are effectively expressed in the condemnation that Gandhi pronounces on the whole European civilization.”⁴⁴ However, it is unlikely that Gandhi’s condemnation was due to the influence of Tolstoy, for Gandhi probably had enough grounds, arguments and reasons to take such a position on his own. The real story is that exactly this aspect of Gandhi’s thought in fact impressed Tolstoy the most. Tolstoy offered a profound critique of European civilization that covered almost all aspects of social life (the political system, economy, science, art, judicial system and monetary system). Gandhi also gave a thorough critique of the West to the extent that he rejected machines, teachers, doctors and judges. While the similarities and dissimilarities in their critique need a detailed study, such an examination is beyond the scope of our present discussion. Suffice it is to say that the pathos of their critique was moral. They believed that modern civilization had no right to exist for the following reasons: it was based on material well-being and mammonism; all its institutions had an external character alien to humanity; and its backbone was violence. Tolstoy and Gandhi were simply consistent as thinkers and honest as human beings: the law of love and the law of violence: they exclude each other.

Conclusion: Perspective of Applicability

The writings of Tolstoy and Gandhi do not provide us any materials that show differences and polemic between them. Tolstoy had high regard for Gandhi and his activities. Gandhi also always had deep reverence for Tolstoy’s teachings and name. (In his address on the 100th anniversary of Tolstoy’s birth, Gandhi stated, “For inculcating this true and higher type of ahimsa amongst us, Tolstoy’s life with his ocean-like love

should serve as a beacon and a never-failing source of inspiration.”)⁴⁵ However, there was one disagreement between them. In his *A Letter to a Hindu*, Tolstoy mentioned that the idea of reincarnation is based on religious prejudice. Before Gandhi published this letter, he explained to Tolstoy that the idea of reincarnation is embraced by Hindus, and besides, it provides a reasonable key to many mysteries, asking Tolstoy to remove his comment in a most tactful manner. Although Tolstoy stuck to his view, he left the final decision to Gandhi. In a comparison of Gandhi’s and Tolstoy’s teachings, it would be more correct not to focus on their different approaches, but to see them from the perspective of applicability. Gandhi spread the idea of non-violence in the realm of social life. It can be said that proceeding from the religious and moral ideas of Tolstoy, he conceived of a brilliant strategy and tactics of non-violence during India’s struggle for national liberation.

Notes

¹ Sergiyenko 1939, 343.

² Tolstoy 1957a, 143.

³ Tolstoy 1955, 110.

⁴ Sergiyenko 1939, 344.

⁵ Tolstoy 1956, 247.

⁶ Tolstoy 1934, 99.

⁷ As Green (1986, 9) states, “Tolstoy wrote his last long letter to Gandhi”, it is sometimes presumed that this was probably Tolstoy’s last letter. It sounds touching in terms of the relations between Tolstoy and Gandhi, but it is at odds with the facts. In reality, Tolstoy wrote more than 124 letters after the letter to Gandhi.

⁸ Tolstoy 1956a, 136.

⁹ Tolstoy 1957b, 215.

¹⁰ Sergiyenko 1939, 349.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 352.

¹² Murthy 1987, 76.

¹³ Sergiyenko 1939, 352.

¹⁴ Tolstoy 1956b, 444.

¹⁵ Tolstoy 1937a, 163.

¹⁶ Tolstoy 1956b, 444.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 258.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 260.

¹⁹ Quoted from English philosopher Herbert Spencer’s *Sociology*.

²⁰ Tolstoy 1956b, 267.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 269.

²² *Ibid.*, 271.

²³ *Ibid.*, 271.

- ²⁴ Judging from D.P. Makovitsky's notes of April 19, the reference is to the Japanese who visited Yasnaya Polyana. Their names were Harada and Kaju Midzutaki. The former was a man of about 50, a samurai educated in America who had lived in China and India for a long time. He was familiar with Tolstoy's teachings, but not in sympathy with them. However, he did say after his meeting with Tolstoy that he was now in a quandary. He had a long one-to-one talk with Tolstoy who also asked him many questions about China and India, mainly their religious and moral life. The latter was a young man of 27 who was sent to Moscow's People's University to study the Russian language and Russian technology after graduating from a university in his home country (See Tolstoy 1934, 364).
- ²⁵ Gandhi 2019, 9.
- ²⁶ Tolstoy 1934, 39–40. He was referring to Joseph J. Doke's biography of Gandhi, *M.K. Gandhi; An Indian Patriot in South Africa* (London, 1909).
- ²⁷ Tolstoy 1957b, 185.
- ²⁸ Sergiyenko 1939, 346.
- ²⁹ Gandhi 2012, 154.
- ³⁰ Gandhi 2012a, 476.
- ³¹ Gandhi 2019, 94.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ Gandhi 2012, 140.
- ³⁴ Gandhi 2019, 95.
- ³⁵ Tolstoy 1956a, 137.
- ³⁶ Tolstoy 1937, 391.
- ³⁷ Gandhi 2019, 96.
- ³⁸ H. Williams, *The Ethics of Diet* (London, 1883; Russian translation 1893).
- ³⁹ Gandhi 2012, 204–10.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 311.
- ⁴¹ Tolstoy 1957, 71.
- ⁴² Gandhi 2012, 261.
- ⁴³ Gandhi 2019, 104.
- ⁴⁴ Rolland 1936 (website).
- ⁴⁵ Gandhi 2012a, 476.

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