# CHAPTER XIII

TOLSTOY AND GANDHI

I N central Russia, a Slav aristocrat grappled with the same

spiritual problems that occupied the Hindu lawyer in South

Africa. Across continents, Count Leo Tolstoy guided Mohan¬

das K. Gandhi and found solace in his struggle.

In Gandhi’s law office there were several books by Tolstoy on

religious subjects. But it was only during the leisure of jail that

the Indian absorbed the great Russian’s teachings.

War and Peace , probably the world’s greatest novel. Resurrection ,

Anna Karenina , and other works of art brought Tolstoy colossal

success and universal recognition. But his soul was always in

torment. The discrepancy between Christ’s message and man’s

way of life troubled him. Born in 1828 to wealth and an ancient

title, Tolstoy abandoned high society and, at the age of fifty-seven,

adopted the simple life: he went barefoot, wore a plain muzhik

smock and trousers, ploughed, harrowed and planted by the side

of the peasants, gave up smoking, meat-eating and hunting, and

began to take long cross-country walks and bicycle rides. In 1891,

in order to escape from ‘intolerable luxury’, he gave his ample

properties to his wife and children and devoted himself to vil¬

lage education, famine relief and writing about vegetarianism,

marriage and theology. Though he excoriated church institu¬

tions, men and women in search of a faith made his home at

Yasnaya Polyana their Mecca; Christians, Jews, Moslems and

Buddhists from the four corners of the earth came to sit at the

feet of the famous, brilliant nobleman who had drunk his fill of

material pleasures and now, nearing seventy, sought God. Among

his guests from abroad were Jane Addams, of Hull House, Chicago;

William Jennings Bryan, subsequently United States Secretary

of State; Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf of Philadelphia; George

Kennan, an American publicist who visited Siberia with the

permission of the Tsarist authorities and then denounced their

cruelty to prisoners; Rainer-Maria Rilke, the German poet, and

Thomas G. Masaryk, later President of Czechoslovakia.

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To these pilgrims, Tolstoy was the strong one who had re¬

nounced. His attraction was his attempt to create, in his own way

of life, a synthesis between creed and conduct. This involved

manual labour, minimum needs, no holding of property, no

killing. He called landlordism ‘a great sin’, extolled Henry

George’s Single Tax, condemned military conscription, defended

conscientious objectors, helped the pacifist Dukhobors to emigrate

to Canada, denounced the pogromists of Kishenev, praised

William Lloyd Garrison’s ‘non-resistance’, taught in a village

primary school and refused the Nobel Prize because he did not

accept money.

The Orthodox Church of Russia excommunicated him.

To a friend in prison Tolstoy wrote, ‘Unfortunately, I am not

in prison. . . .’

The titles of his tracts reveal his mind: Thou Shalt Kill No One,

Love One Another , Why Christian People in General and the Russian

People Especially Fall into Distress , The Teachings of Christ for Children,

Capital Punishment and Christianity , Religious Tolerance, Self-Perfection,

and many more like these.

Tolstoy died on November 20th, 1910, after fleeing from his

wife in the hope of finding peace in a monastery or a Tolstoyan

settlement.

Gandhi came to know Tolstoy through The Kingdom of God

Is Within You. The name of the volume is the gospel of its

author.

‘The history of the church’, Tolstoy bluntly affirmed, ‘is the

history of cruelties and horror ... Every Church, with its doctrines

of redemption and salvation, and above all the Orthodox faith

with its idolatry, excludes the doctrine of Christ.’ Impartially,

and with icy logic and myriad quotations, Tolstoy proved to his

own satisfaction that all Christian churches try ‘to conceal the

true meaning of the doctrine of Christ’.

Tolstoy was equally critical of governments. From the dimmest

ages, he declared, ‘Peace unto you’ has been man’s greeting to

man, yet in Europe Christian nations keep twenty-eight million

men under arms to settle problems by killing. Approvingly he

quoted Guy de Maupassant, the French writer: ‘It is stupefying

that society doe not revolt as a unit against the very sound of the

word “War”.’

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Alexander Herzen, Russia’s great literary critic, had said that

mounting militarism made every modern government ‘a Genghis

Khan with telegraphic equipment’. Tolstoy concurred and added,

‘In the matter of oppression, the Christian nations are worse than

the pagans.’

T believe it is Max Mueller [foremost authority on Asia],’ Tol¬

stoy recalled, ‘who describes the astonishment of an Indian con¬

verted to Christianity who, having learned the essence of Christian

doctrine, came to Europe and beheld the life of Christians.’ This

was Tolstoy’s, as it was Thoreau’s, perpetual theme: the chasm

between doctrine and doing.

What to do? Tolstoy’s answer was simple: Live as a Christian

should. Concretely, ‘A Christian enters into no dispute with his

neighbour, he neither attacks nor uses violence; on the contrary,

he suffers himself, without resistance, and by his very attitude

towards evil not only sets himself free, but helps to free the world

at large from all outward authority.’

The Gita and the Sermon on the Mount had led Gandhi to the

same conclusion.

Tolstoy preached peaceful, painful refusal to serve Or obey evil

governments. He specified: no oath of allegiance, no oath in

court ‘for an oath is distinctly forbidden by the Gospel’, no police

duty, no military duty, no payment of taxes.

‘What are governments to do with these men?’ Tolstoy inquired.

That became Smuts’s problem. He did not know what to do

with the Indians. ‘The position of governments in the presence

of men who profess Christianity’, Tolstoy wrote, ‘is so precarious

that very little is needed to shake their power to pieces.’ Thoreau

said the same thing.

Gandhi began by freeing himself. It was an involved process.

For man is bound by many chains, and the stoutest are forged in

the inner smithy, not by Church or State. ‘The Kingdom of God

is within you.’ You are what you make yourself. You are not free

because you do not free yourself.

‘The Kingdom of God’, Tolstoy wrote, ‘is attained by . . . sacri¬

ficing outward circumstances for the sake of truth.’

Gandhi’s path was strewn with the outward possessions and

pleasures which he cast off en route to the kingdom of God within

him.

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Gandhi’s first personal contact with Tolstoy was in the form of

a long letter, written in English, dated ‘Westminster Palace Hotel,

4 Victoria Street, S.W., London, October ist, 1909’, and sent

from there to Tolstoy at Yasnaya Polyana, in central Russia. In

it, he acquainted the Russian novelist with the civil disobedience

movement in the Transvaal.

In Tolstoy’s diary entry for September 24th, 1909 (the Russian

calendar was then thirteen days behind the Western calendar),

he wrote, ‘Received a pleasant letter from a Hindu of the Trans¬

vaal.’ Four days later, Tolstoy wrote a letter to Vladimir G.

Chertkov, his intimate friend and, later, the editor of his collected

works, saying, ‘The letter of the Transvaal Hindu has touched me.’

Dating his letter from Yasnaya Polyana, October 7th (20th),

1909, Tolstoy wrote a reply to Gandhi in Russian. The Russian

text was translated into English by Tolstoy’s daughter, Tatiana,

who sent it to Gandhi. Tolstoy wrote, ‘I have just received your

most interesting letter, which has given me great pleasure. God

help our dear brothers and co-workers in the Transvaal. The same

struggle of the soft against the harsh, of meekness and love against

pride and violence, is making itself felt every year more and more

among us here ... I greet you fraternally and am happy to have

contact with you. (signed) Tolstoy.’

Gandhi’s second letter to Tolstoy was written in Johannesburg

on April 4th, 1910, and was accompanied by a copy of Gandhi’s

little book, Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule . In the letter Gandhi

said, ‘As a humble follower of yours, I send you herewith a booklet

which I have written. It is my own [English] translation of a

Gujarati writing ... I am most anxious not to worry you, but if

your health permits it, and if you could find the time to go through

the booklet, needless to say I shall value very highly your criticism

of the writing.’

On April 19th, 1910, Tolstoy wrote as follows in his diary:

‘This morning two Japanese arrived. Wild men in ecstasy over

European civilization. On the other hand, the book and the

letter of the Hindu reveal an understanding of all the short¬

comings of European civilization and even of its total in¬

adequacy.’

Next day there was another entry in Tolstoy’s diary: ‘Yesterday

I read Gandhi on civilization. Very good.’ And again the next

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day: ‘Read a book about Gandhi. Very important. I must write

to him/ The book about Gandhi was the Biography of Gandhi by

J. J. Doke, which Gandhi had sent to Tolstoy.

A day later, Tolstoy wrote a letter to his friend Chertkov in

which he referred to Gandhi as ‘a person very close to us, to me’.

Tolstoy replied to Gandhi on April 25th (May 8th), 1910, from

Yasnaya Polyana. He wrote:

Dear Friend: I just received your letter and your book, Indian

Home Rule . I read your book with great interest because of the

things and questions you treat in it: passive resistance is a question

of the greatest importance, not only for India, but for the whole of

humanity.

I cannot find your former letters, but came across your bio¬

graphy by J. Doss [this is a mistake made by Tolstoy] which too

interested me much and gave me the possibility to know and

understand your letter. I am not quite well at present and there¬

fore abstain from writing to you all what I have to say about

your book and all your work, which I appreciate very much, but

I will do it as soon as I will feel better. Your friend and brother,

L. Tolstoy.

This was the English translation, sent to Gandhi, of Tolstoy’s

perfect Russian.

Gandhi’s third letter to Tolstoy is dated ‘21-24 Court Chambers,

corner Rissik and Anderson Streets, Johannesburg, August 15th,

1910’. In it Gandhi acknowledged Tolstoy’s letter of May 8th,

with thanks, and added: ‘I shall look forward to your detailed

criticism of the work which you have been so good as to promise

in your letter.’ Gandhi also informed Tolstoy of the establishment

of Tolstoy Farm by Kallenbach and himself. He said that Kallen-

bach was writing to Tolstoy about the farm. The letters of

Gandhi and Kallenbach, accompanied by several issues of

Gandhi’s weekly, Indian Opinion , heightened Tolstoy’s interest

in Gandhi. In his diary of September 6th (19th), 1910, Tolstoy

wrote, ‘Pleasant news from Transvaal about the passive resistance

colony.’ Tolstoy was at this time in a state of serious spiritual

depression and physically ill. Nevertheless, he replied to Gandhi’s

letter on the day he received it. Tolstoy dictated the letter on the

evenings of the 5th and 6th of September (18th and 19th). On the

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7th (20th), Tolstoy corrected the letter and sent it in Russian to

Chertkov for English translation.

It was Chertkov who posted Tolstoy’s letter to Gandhi. Chert¬

kov included in the letter a letter of his own in which he said:

My friend, Leo Tolstoy, has requested me to acknowledge the

receipt of your letter to him of August 15th and to translate into

English his letter to you of September 7th (new style-20th Sept.)

written originally in Russian.

All you communicate about Mr. Kallenbach has greatly

interested Tolstoy, who has asked me to answer for him Mr.

Kallenbach’s letter. Tolstoy sends you and your co-workers his

heartiest greetings and warmest wishes for the success of your

work, his appreciation of which you will gather from the enclosed

translation of his letter to you. I must apologize for my mistakes

in English in the translation, but living in the country in Russia,

I am unable to profit by the assistance of any Englishman for

correcting my mistakes.

With Tolstoy’s permission his letter to you will be published in

a small periodical printed by some friends of ours in London. A

copy of the magazine with the letter shall be forwarded to you,

as also some English publications of Tolstoy’s writings issued by

4 The Free Age Press’.

As it seems to me most desirable that more should be known in

English about your movement, I am writing to a great friend of

mine and Tolstoy, Mrs. Mayo, of Glasgow, proposing that she

should enter into communication with you. . . .

Chertkov sent a separate letter to Mr. Kallenbach.

Tolstoy’s own letter to Gandhi was the longest in the whole

correspondence. Dated September 7th (20th), 1910, and trans¬

lated into English by Chertkov, it was sent to an intermediary in

England for posting to Gandhi. The intermediary was ill at the

time and only posted the letter on November 1st, so that Gandhi

received the letter in the Transvaal several days after the death

of Count Leo Tolstoy.

Tolstoy said:

The longer I live, and especially now when I vividly feel the

nearness of death, I want to tell others what I feel so particularly

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clearly and what to my mind is of great importance — namely,

that which is called passive resistance, but which in reality is

nothing else than the teaching of love, uncorrupted by false

interpretations.

That love ... is the highest and only law of human life and in

the depths of his soul every human being (as we see most clearly

in children) feels and knows this; he knows this until he is en¬

tangled by the false teachings of the world. This law was pro¬

claimed by all, by the Indian as well as by the Chinese, Hebrew,

Greek and Roman sages of the world. . . .

In reality, as soon as force was admitted into love, there was no

more and there could be no more love as the law of life, and as

there was no law of love, there was no law at all, except violence —

i.e. the power of the strongest. Thus Christian mankind has lived

for nineteen centuries. . . .

This was a very old man on the brink of death writing to a very

young man; Gandhi was young, usually twenty-five years younger

in spirit than his age. Tolstoy was profoundly unhappy. Anyone

with the insight of War and Peace yet conscious of humanity’s

refusal, or inability, to use the key to happiness available in Christ’s

teachings would have to be unhappy. Gandhi, however, believed

he could reform himself and others. He was doing it. It made

him happy.