

Tolstoy's Philosophy of Non-Violence: A Discourse

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ABSTRACT

The title of this paper is *Tolstoy's Philosophy of Non-violence: A Discourse* and the major thesis projected in this research is the idea that the actualization of peace, as demonstrated in Tolstoy's philosophy of non-violence, requires the adoption of a revolutionary approach which has the potential of terminating the vicious circle of violence. Conflict is evidently an inevitable social phenomenon. Consequently, every event of conflict avails us of an opportunity to convert a seemingly destructive occurrence into a constructive outcome. This constructive conversion of conflict is what Tolstoy sought to achieve. This approach to conflict does not only ensure the sustenance of peace but it promotes harmonious social coexistence and entrenches the culture of non-violence. The benefits of non-violence cannot however be overemphasized and every pragmatic method for achieving peace should be studied. This constitutes the rationale behind this paper's investigation of Tolstoy's methodology of non-violence. Though most pundits would be averse to the Tolstoyian method as impracticable, but Tolstoy was inspired by the example of Christ in the Bible and he believed that a passionate commitment to the Biblical teachings of Christ requires that Christians must imitate the examples of Christ.

The paper utilizes the method of analysis to expose the conflict resolution formula of non-resistance to evil which is the intellectual ferment from which Tolstoy draws inspiration for his philosophy of non-violence. The major problem of this work is to expose the conflict resolution method espoused by Tolstoy and the central objective of the paper is to showcase the method of active passivism; borne out of the law of love, as an instrument of conquering violence in contradistinction to fascism which is based on the law of force and can only generate an unending spiral of violence. Whereas Tolstoy's approach is contradictory to fascism in the sense that it absolutely negates the use of coercion and oppression, his non-violent non-resistance to evil is however a contrary to the non-violent resistance principle adopted by most freedom fighters like Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. Tolstoy's idea, critically assessed, may be appraised as containing the recipe for the multiplication of social evil; an outcome which Tolstoy vehemently aimed at averting and banishing through his *modus operandi*.

Keywords- Tolstoy, Philosophy, Non-violence, Nonresistance, Conflict Resolution.

I. INTRODUCTION

Tolstoy was born into a wealthy aristocratic family in Russia. He was the fourth of five children of Count Nikolai Ilyich Tolstoy and Countess Mariya Tolstaya. At the age of 16, he began studying law and oriental languages. His teachers described him as both unwilling and unable to learn. He dropped out of the University and started writing novels. He married Sophia Andreevna, 16 years younger than him and the marriage was blessed with 13 children, 5 of whom died in childhood. Tolstoy's marriage was rosy until he took up the hermitic lifestyle and began to renounce property to the point of rejecting inherited and earned wealth

including the copyrights on his works like *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, *Novellas*, *A Confession* etc. Tolstoy associated intellectually with the leading spirit of non-violence and abolitionism like Lloyd Garrison (1805-1879), Adin Ballou (1803 – 1890) Thoreau (1817-1862) etc, appreciated and admired their worth, invoked and referred to the message of Christ on the Mount as the paradigm of love and the principles of non-violence through non-resistance to evil. Armed with and informed by the law of love, he aspired to transform humanity through utter renunciation of all violence (According to *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia* (<http://en.wikipedia.org/Sept.9,1828-Nov.20,1910>).

II. TOLSTOY'S PHILOSOPHY OF NON-VIOLENCE: BACKGROUND AND SUBSTANCE

Tolstoy's Philosophy of non-violence, what he calls "non-resistance to evil" is traceable to his conversion to Christianity. Prior to his conversion, Tolstoy had wondered over the meaning of the seeming meaninglessness and futility of life. He resorted to investigating the great thinkers of science, religion and philosophy all in vain in search for the meaning of life. The high point of this search was his encounter with the Biblical passage of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The passage furnished satisfactory answer to his existential anxiety over the meaning of life (*What I Believe* 15 - 18). This passage that had an overwhelming input on his life is contained in the book of Matthew 5:38-42 and it says: "You have heard that it had been said, "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" But I say unto you, that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away your coat, let him have the cloak. And whosoever shall compel you to go a mile, go with him two. Give to him that asks you, and from him that will borrow from you turn not away."

Udofia, Christopher and Eyo in *Taxonomy of Methods of Conflict Resolution* (51) observe that conflict is an ineluctable existential phenomenon and the perception and style of addressing it can render it violent or non-violent. Tolstoy discerned a revolutionary formula of resolving conflict through non-resistance to evil in Christ's non-violent approach. He reasoned that the tit-for-tat, an evil for evil or violence for violence approach has only culminated in a vicious circle of evil. The diagonal opposite relationship between the violent approach and the demands of the Christian living is expressed by Tolstoy thus:

My personal life is interwoven with the social, political life, and the political life demands of me a non-Christian activity, which is directly opposed to Christ's Commandment. Now, with the universal military service and the participation of all in the court in the capacity of jurymen, this dilemma is with striking distinctness placed before all people. Every man has to take up the weapon of murder, the gun, the knife, and, though he does not kill, he must load his gun and whet his knife, that is, be prepared to commit murder. Every citizen must come to court and be a participant in the court and in the punishment, that is, every man has to renounce Christ's Commandment of non-resistance to evil, not only in words, but in action as well (*"My Religion"* 22).

This repulsion to the law of violence in the social system of state persuaded him to opine that the state is an unchristian institution since it demands what

is against the teachings of Christ as contained in the Sermon on the Mount. He avers:

Christ says, Do not resist evil. The purpose of the courts is to resist evil. Christ prescribes doing good in return for evil. The courts retaliate evil with evil. Christ says, make no distinction between the good and the bad. All the courts do is to make this distinction. Christ says, Forgive all men; forgive, not once, not seven times, but without end; love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. The courts do not forgive, but punish; they do not do good, but evil, to those whom they call enemies of society. Thus it turns out, according to the meaning, that Christ must have rejected the courts (*'My Religion'*, 25)

Garnered from Tolstoy's position is the fact that Christianity and the state have an incompatible relationship. Borne of his devastating experience of state execution and his conviction of the non-violent teaching of Christ, Tolstoy reached a conclusion: "The truth is that the state is a conspiracy designed not only to exploit, but above all to corrupt its citizens.... Henceforth, I shall never serve any government anywhere" (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leo-Tolstoy>).

In his letter to Mohandas K. Gandhi, he bemoans that the whole Christian civilization has been sprawling on an evident principle of contradiction. He locates such contradictions in the attitude of Christian nations who profess the law of love but live at all times by the law of force. In this situation therefore, the Christian nations live under a contradiction between love; which should specify the law of conduct and the employment of force, recognized under various forms such as governments, courts, and armies.

Explicating Tolstoy's principle of love, Abdusalam A. Guseinov in his "Tolstoy's Theory of Nonviolence" (online) explains that in applying love in its highest degree through non-violence, we should take cognizance of the two-parts formula of love: negative (not as I want) and positive (as you want). The positive law of love, he notes, is impossible since we don't know what God wants. The only possible relation to God therefore lies in the negative voluntary restriction of our activity. In human affairs, this restriction of one's activity translates to non-violence since to act in a violent way means to do what is not wanted by the party and it is the direct opposite of love. Thus, the negative part of one's expression of love is the negative of violence which is non-violence.

Extolling the momentary dividends on social life provided by the state in terms of security given to property and labour, he notes that such benefits disappear through military service, thus:

"The taxes levied on the people for armaments and war absorb the greater part of the products of that labour which the army is

called upon to protect. Taking away the whole male population from the ordinary occupations of their life destroys the very possibility of labour. The menace of war, ever ready to break out from one moment to the next, renders vain and profitless all improvements of social life. ("The Kingdom of God" 7. iii)

Tolstoy's aim in his philosophy of non-violence based on love was to transform society through an inner moral revolution in individuals. He observes that if Christians were to govern themselves in the Law of love, then there will be no need for the state which rules by coercion and resistance to evil. He held the conviction that the most potent force to engage in overcoming evil is non-resistance or non-violence. Non-resistance does not breed more evil as resistance does. Joining his voice with the pacifist teachings, Tolstoy makes reference to the *Declaration of Peace Convention* of 1838 in Boston thus:

"We register our testimony, not only against all wars, whether offensive or defensive, but all preparations for war; against every naval ship, every arsenal, every fortification, against the militia system and a standing army, against all military chieftains and soldiers, against all monuments commemorative of victory over a foreign foe, all trophies won in battle, all celebrations in honor of military or naval exploits, against all appropriations for the defense of a nation by force and arms on the part of any legislative body, against every edict of governments, requiring of its subjects military service. Hence we deem it unlawful to bear arms, or to hold a military office. As every human government is upheld by physical strength, and its laws are enforced virtually at the point of the bayonet, we cannot hold any office which impose upon its incumbent the obligation to compel men to do right, on pain of imprisonment or death. We therefore voluntarily exclude ourselves from every legislative and judicial body and repudiate all human politics, worldly honors, and stations of authority. If we cannot occupy a seat in the legislature or on the bench, neither can we elect others to act as our substitutes in any such capacity ("The kingdom of God is within you", 4. i)

The above undertaking represents the pacifists article of faith and serves as a normative guide to all pacifists actions. Their tenet of non-cooperation and non-participation with the evil social system was ensconced on the justification that the ultimate overcoming of evil by good is inevitable only when the principles of non-violent nonresistance are imbibed and engaged in daily encounters in the social system.

Evidently, it is clear that Tolstoy directly associates and equates peace with non-violence to evil based on love which restrains actors from participating in any harmful destructive acts but actuates and burdens man with a moral obligation to submit passively to even evil machinations so as to overcome evil with good. Tolstoy's pacifism is expressed in the imagery of Christ presented in Isaiah 53:7-8. Here Christ is portrayed as an immaculate lamb who passed through serial afflictions without even an iota of verbal altercation with his torturers. This portrayal of Christ is paradigmatic for Tolstoy. But Christ is a mystery pregnant with meaning to all shades of affiliations. Succinctly, he is often invoked by violent activist as a resister against profanity and evil as depicted in his whipping of money exchangers out of the temple (John 2:15).

However, we have to bear in mind that the ultimate aim of the non-resisters was to entrench on earth the parousiac peaceful reign of Christ. This goal is captured in their terms thus:

If we abide by our principles, it is impossible for us to be disorderly, or plot treason, or participate in any evil work, we shall submit to every ordinance of man, for the Lord's sake, obey all the requirements of governments, except such as we deem contrary to the commands of the gospel, and in no case resist the operation of the law, except by meekly submitting to the penalty of disobedience. But while we shall adhere to the doctrine of non-resistance and passive submission we purpose, in a moral and spiritual sense, to speak and act boldly in the cause of God, to assail iniquity in high places and in low places, to apply our principles to all existing civil, political, legal and ecclesiastical institutions, and to hasten the time when the kingdom of this world have become the kingdom of our Lord and His Christ, and He shall reign forever (Quoted in "The Kingdom of God is Within You, 6f.ch.1)

III. CONCLUSION

Critically, a prima facie appraisal of Tolstoy's non-violent non-resistance is suggestive of a streak of pessimism undercutting his thought structure. Passive submission to evil does not seem to be an admirable method of an optimistic social engagement. It is even underscored that passivity may serve as an incentive to social evil.

In the contrary, a profound reflection on Tolstoy's model of peace and its underpinnings reveal it to be a formidable soul force that appeals to the moral sentiments with a much transformative and conversional potency than the force of brutal resistance to evil. The peace achieved through the method of violent resistance to injustice is ephemeral as violence breeds its like, but

that instilled through Tolstoy's principles is perpetual because its progeny will bear out the same non-violent, non-resistant genetic trait.

To this end the apparent effeminacy and pessimism of this method is unrepresentative of its underlying fervid resoluteness in accomplishing indelible social moral transformation. In commendation of the efficacy of Tolstoy's method, it is pertinent to aver that the vicious cycle of violence can only be eradicated through the virtuous cycle of human ennobling non-violent love. Corroborating this position, Tolstoy attests that

The movement of humanity toward the good takes place, not thanks to tormentors, but to the tormented. As fire does not put out fire, so evil does not put out evil. Only the good meeting the evil, and not becoming contaminated by it, vanquishes the evil. Every step in that advance has been made only in the name of non-resistance to evil. And if this progress is slow, it is so because the clearness, simplicity, rationality, inevitableness, and obligatoriness of Christ's teaching have been

concealed...under a false teaching.... ("My Religion" 44, IV).

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