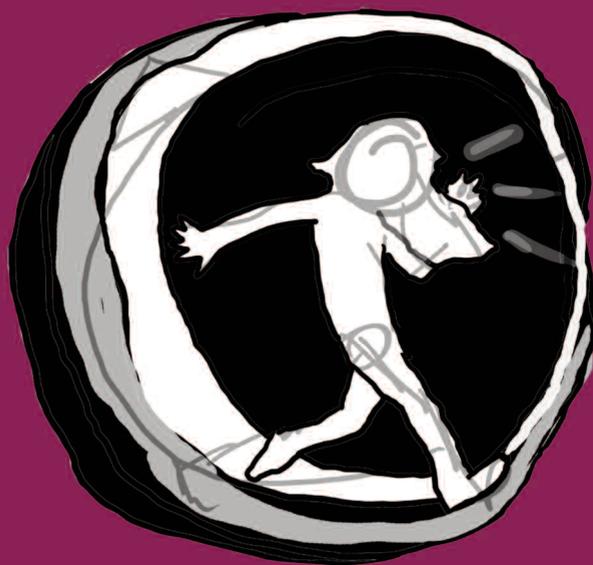


**booklets**

**LEO TOLSTOY, POLITICAL PROPHET  
AND EVANGELICAL ANARCHIST**



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**Antoni Blanch**



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**Antoni Blanch, sj.**, was professor emeritus of comparative literature at Comillas Pontifical University (Madrid). His two most recent works are *El hombre imaginario: una antropología literaria* [Imaginary Man: A Literary Anthropology] (1995) and *El espíritu de la letra. Acercamiento creyente en la Literatura* [The Spirit of the Letter: Approaching Literature with Belief] (2002). He is also the author of *Longing for a Greater Justice* (Cristianisme i Justícia, Booklet 120). He was a member of Cristianisme i Justícia until his death at the end of 2013. We publish this booklet posthumously as a homage to our great friend and collaborator.

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# INTRODUCTION

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The great Russian known as Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) is today universally known for his two monumental novels, *War and Peace* (1869) and *Anna Karenina* (1878), which he wrote before the age of 50. His later work, however, is not well known even though it is also very important and has an orientation notably different from his earlier literary work. It consists of more than a hundred essays and several short novels which he published between 1878 and his death at age 82.

Our interest in this essay is to understand how this great change in Tolstoy came about and what consequences it had. To that end we will have to delve, first of all, into the meaning of the severe personal crisis that Tolstoy experienced precisely at the height of his literary success. How and why did he undergo a dramatic mental and moral depression that sunk him into nihilistic darkness? Fortunately the crisis did not last long; he soon recovered from it and was transformed into what might be called «a new man». Anticipating the analysis of this study, we can describe Tolstoy's

radically renewed life in general terms by saying that his spirit was consumed with a passion to rectify the unjust situation of the Russian workers and peasants and to struggle against the royal powers that caused the situation. In undergoing this transformation he felt especially inspired, for the first time in life, by a dramatic awareness of the person of Jesus and the revolutionary proclamations of his Gospel. Both these factors, the rebelliousness of the social revolutionary and the evangelical spirit of the prophet, converged so forcefully in this gifted writer and teacher that we

do well to apply to the radically renewed Tolstoy the title «social and evangelical prophet».

Indeed, when perusing some of the hundred or so essays and newspaper articles published by Tolstoy in his later years, the reader encounters an author very different from the earlier artist who described so magnificently the great Napoleonic wars in Russia and the supercilious customs of the Czarist aristocracy to which he himself belonged. In this second phase of his life he has become a didactic, polemical author who writes with the anguished intensity of a social and political reformer. He is also much more inclined to take action by getting involved in concrete educational projects with uneducated peasants and installing health clinics in the vast properties he owned. He studied with intense interest the modern social reformers of Europe as well as the relevant Russian thinkers, many of whom had been exiled for their revolutionary ideas. He surrounded himself with

leftists and helped to organize popular movements for reform. What is even more surprising in this evolution of Tolstoy is that everything he did and wrote from that moment on was profoundly inspired by some of the boldest proposals of Jesus as recounted in the Gospels, which Tolstoy himself translated directly from Greek into Russian. Motivated by this surprising prophetic vocation, he wanted to make the Good News known to the general public

Our objective in these pages is to recover the essence of this teaching of the later Tolstoy so as to make it available to our own cultural and political epoch in Spain and Europe, a time when blatant mediocrity and self-absorbed individualism seem to prevail. I hope that this portrait of a more revolutionary and spiritual Tolstoy will serve as a stimulus to our present generation of perplexed, indignant, and rebellious citizens. Tolstoy deserves to be numbered among the great moral teachers, who unfortunately are scarce in our times.

# 1. THE SOCIO-POLITICAL SITUATION OF RUSSIA IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE 19TH CENTURY

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Under the despotic regime of the czars the conditions prevailing in Russian society were still almost feudal. A scandalous distance separated the aristocracy and a small class of well-off landlords and merchants from the enormous mass of workers and peasants. We should not forget that these rural workers (*mujiks*) were still subject to a feudal system, which was legally abolished in 1861 but existed in fact until the revolution of 1917.

## 1.1. An unsustainable social situation

Russia had not developed industrially and so had not experienced the bourgeois revolution that transformed society in western Europe at the end of the 18th century. In Russia the professional middle class was quite small and lived mainly in the large cities of the country. As grossly unjust as Russia's social inequality was, it was made even worse by the countless wars that the czars waged to defend their borders or to conquer new territories.

After the long, drawn-out victory of Russia over Napoleon in 1812, which left the country in a calamitous state, Russian militarism suffered humiliation in two other conflicts: the war against the Turks in Crimea (1858) –in which Leo Tolstoy took part, along with his brother Nicholas– and the naval defeat at the hands of distant Japan (1905). This socio-political situation was already precarious and disastrous for the people, but it was made still worse by the increasingly frequent demonstrations of popular resistance to the regime, which the police repressed ruthlessly.

The first public rebellion with wide support was that of the «Decembrists» of 1825 in Saint Petersburg, in which some nobles took part for the first time. The revolt was quickly squelched by the czar, who a few days later staged the execution of its main leaders in the main plaza. Nevertheless, the rebels did not disappear. Clandestine groups continued to be formed, many inspired by the short-lived French revolution of 1848 (the same year in which the *Communist Manifesto* of Marx and Engels appeared in England). The Russian revolutionary movement was also invigorated in the years following by the removal from power of the second French emperor, Napoleon III, and by the revolutionary struggles of the Paris Commune in 1871. In fact, this defeat of another French emperor was partly the result of the effective intervention of the powerful Russian army. All these political movements in Europe aroused keen interest in Russia not only among politicians but also among university intellectuals and the writers in literary circles. They boldly expressed their concerns and their hopes, some in more conservative fashion (such as the nationalists, Slavophiles, and Orthodox Christians) and others more progressively by demanding civil liberties similar to those existing in the democratic republics of the West. There also existed a third, minority tendency that was nihilist, anarchist, and revolutionary; terrorist commandos from this sector committed assaults and went so far as to assassinate Czar Alexander II in 1881.

## **1.2. The restlessness of a sensitive and lucid spirit**

Given such a situation, it is easy to imagine the dismay that would be felt by a spirit as sensitive and lucid as that of Leo Tolstoy as he witnessed the great abuse of power and the widespread misery of the people. It is true that when he was quite young he had participated in some of Russia's wars as an officer, but he had been so affected by the monstrous cruelty of the violence he saw that he developed a decidedly pacifist posture in his later years. He also became ever more concerned about trying to alleviate the terrible injustice that weighed heavily on the lives of so many millions of poor Russian workers. After he emerged from his profound personal crisis, he was determined to dedicate his life to a two-fold political struggle: against physical violence and against social injustice.

Fortunately, little effort is required to find confirmation of this new direction in Tolstoy's life. In one of the most interesting books he wrote in this period, *My Confession* (1882), he gives us direct access to the personal itinerary he took in pursuing his vocation of altruism and transcendence. Before citing from this confession, however, we will provide more information about the intellectual setting in which Tolstoy found himself, for he was assuredly part of a reformist and even revolutionary movement that included many contemporary Russian thinkers and writers who dissented from the official doctrine.

## 2. REFORMIST THOUGHT IN PRE-REVOLUTIONARY RUSSIA

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Among the European Enlightenment authors who were most read in Russia at that time were Rousseau, Diderot, Kant, and Hegel, all of whom proposed new forms of common life for humanity. They did so quite rationally but also with a decidedly utopian spirit. The models of society they proposed featured freedom and solidarity and therefore were directly opposed to the political tyranny of the feudal regime.

### 2.1. The intellectuals who influenced Tolstoy

Tolstoy was influenced by Russian intellectuals living in exile or clandestinely. One of these was Visarion Bielinski, an ethics professor and socialist of the Hegelian left who from London actively criticized the existing system. Tolstoy was perhaps even more influenced by a liberal anti-Hegelian exile named Alexander Herzen whose utopian socialism condemned the western bourgeoisie. Herzen advocated radical and urgent changes, but he insisted that they always be undertaken with moderation and with full respect

for the most genuine values of the Russian people. He had an evident influence on the «populism» of Nicholas Chernichevski, who insisted with his followers on the primordial importance of religious compassion. These three authors, therefore, had a great influence on Tolstoy's thought.

The Russian anarchist authors Bakunin and Kropotkin were of a more revolutionary bent; they were disciples of the French thinker Proudhon, who proposed radical libertarian approaches to social change. His followers included the most extremist Russians, such as the nihilists and terrorists Nekrasov,

Pisarev, and Netxayev, who were appropriately described as «demons» by Dostoyevsky in his novel, *The Possessed* (1871). To be sure, both terrorism and nihilist thought were prevalent among progressive young Russians during the 1830s and 1840s when Nicholas I ruled with an iron fist. Frustrated in their romantic attempts to live with a freedom that was beyond their reach, those young men surrendered to the futility of existence; rejecting traditional values, they ended up committing suicide or engaging in terrorist crime.

## 2.2. Committed literature

It is interesting to note that all these various ideological types were reproduced as literary characters in a number of the novels and dramatic works produced by the great Russian authors of the epoch. The writers of the school of «socialist realism» described graphically the misery of the poor masses in

order to awaken compassion among the better off.

Among the earliest of them, writing in the 1840s, was Nicholas Gogol, whose famous stories include *Dead Souls* and *The Overcoat*. The following generation (in the 1860s and 1870s) was more conscious of Russia's tragic situation, and they created works of great value that cogently portrayed the dramatic tension that resulted when desperate individuals rose up in opposition to the established social system. In this regard, three great authors contemporaneous with Tolstoy are worthy of mention: Ivan Turgenev with his *Fathers and Sons* (1862), Fyodor Dostoyevsky with his *Notes from Underground* (1864) and *The Possessed* (1871), and Anton Chekhov with his *Aunt Vanya* (1902). The turn of the century saw the start of the official Marxist strain of «socialist realism» in works of Maxim Gorki such as *The Mother* (1902) and *The Lower Depths* (1917).

### 3. THE THOUGHT OF TOLSTOY BEFORE HIS CONVERSION

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As I mentioned already, Tolstoy's autobiographical texts will be our primary source for recovering the main features of his spiritual evolution. However, before examining *My Confession*, written after his great crisis, we will look at the personal diary which young Tolstoy began at the age of seven (!) and continued throughout his life.

#### 3.1. The sensitivity of an orphan

The first chapters of this diary, which was published in 1852 with the title *Childhood, Adolescence, and Youth*, already give evidence of a great writer in the making; he recounts his first experiences and reflections in very precise form. Quite noteworthy, for example, are the descriptions of the gripping emotions this child felt as he dealt with the early loss of his mother and his father. Starting from those early years the specter of death would continually haunt his mind as a menace that frightened him and provoked in

him anguish at the absurdity of existence.

The young Tolstoy also experienced from those early years great distress as he witnessed the treatment aristocratic families inflicted on their servants, even subjecting them at times to humiliating corporal punishments. His autobiography makes it clear that even as a youth he was conscious of how he was being deceived by teachers and even by priests who offered him instruction. Already planted in his soul was the seed of inconformity and rebellion that would stay with him all his life.

Still another notable characteristic of Tolstoy's early years was his great love of reading; he devoured the great Russian authors but also Homer, Dickens, Dumas, Stendhal, and many others. Most of all he adored Rousseau, reading all 24 volumes of his works in French. This philosopher of the Enlightenment exercised a tremendous influence on Tolstoy's thought in such themes as conceptions of love, methods for educating young people, advocacy of equality for all human beings, and complete confidence in Nature.

### 3.2. War...

At the age of eighteen, then, Tolstoy seemed already well prepared to deal with life, although he was still not in control of his passions. For some years he would experience all kinds of moral disorders and violent impulses, which were calmed only when his opportune enlistment in the army of the Caucasus finally subjected him to rigorous discipline. The war against the Turks soon broke out, however, and this terrifying experience of lethal violence of humans against humans so revolted him that, after leaving the military, he became a champion of non-violence and an adamant opponent of obligatory military service. In view of what I will say later, we do well to recall here that during these years of youthful passion and during his time at the university of Kazan Tolstoy had abandoned his orthodox religious beliefs. As he himself notes, he enjoyed reading Voltaire's scornful remarks about the church.

### 3.3. ...and peace

Fortunately these tumultuous years of his youth were followed by a time of personal tranquility and happiness. He settled into the peace and quiet of his estate at Yasnaya Poliana, far from Moscow, and married the young princess Sophia Bers. With great enthusiasm the young couple undertook to create and educate a large family. It was also in those years that Tolstoy was able to write the two great novels already mentioned; they won for him well deserved universal fame. Assisted by his wife, this genial writer dedicated long years to study and to intense creative work in order to realize his literary dream. At the same time, he was actively involved in the education of his children, and he took a personal interest in the trying situation of the small farmers who were working their lands.

### 3.4. Conversion

In the first chapters of *My Confession* the author describes two phases of his personal journey; the description was written fifteen years later, by which time Tolstoy had suffered his terrible existential crisis and was a changed man. He had experienced a «descent into hell» and had emerged from it transformed into a different person. It was precisely that conversion, which had a clearly religious character, that moved him to write the retrospective confession which I will now comment on.

Cultural anthropologists are correct when they assert that the heroes of an-

cient myths and legends did not reach their full protagonism until they after they had gone through a harrowing personal trial. Tolstoy seems to have undergone something similar before entering into his new phase of heroic rebellion. We have evidence of a very obscure, complex event, but we are lacking details about it. We can get some idea of what happened, however, by citing a statement made by the hero himself, which was later summed up by his friend Romain Rolland in the biography published the year of his death.<sup>1</sup>

«I was fifty years old. I loved and was loved. I had good children, a large estate, glory, health, and physical and moral vigor. I was able to harvest like any villager; I worked ten hours a day without tiring. But my life came to a sudden stop. I could breathe, eat, drink, sleep. But I was not alive. I no longer had any desires. I knew that there was nothing to be desired, not even knowledge of the truth; the truth was that life was absurdity. I had reached the abyss and saw clearly that there was nothing before me but death. Strong and

happy though I was, I felt that I could no longer live. An invincible force was driving me to end my life. [...] I don't mean that I wanted to kill myself. The force that was driving me beyond life was stronger than I was; it was an aspiration similar to my old aspiration to live, except that it was in the other direction. I had to be shrewd with myself in order not to yield to it excessively. And there I was, a happy man, having to hide the rope from myself in order not to hang myself from a beam amid the dressers of my room where every night I undressed alone. [...] My life seemed to me a stupid farce that was being staged for me by someone else. Forty years of work, of suffering, of progress, just to see that there is nothing! Nothing. Nothing would be left of me but corruption and worms. [...] And worst of all, I could not resign myself. I was like a man lost in the woods, overcome with terror because he is disoriented and running aimlessly without being able to stop even though he knows that every step leads him further astray...»

## 4. THE NEW LIFE AFTER CONVERSION

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After his anxieties about death had subsided, Tolstoy drew out of the depths of his being new forces for life and a fresh sense of the meaning of existence.

### 4.1. The meaning of life

In *My Confessions* he asks: «Why is it that so many people can live without knowing the true meaning of life?». By way of answer, he suggests that perhaps they haven't looked for it where it's really to be found. Some people make the mistake of being content with their ignorance; others seek meaning in pleasure or power or physical force; still others are satisfied with being confined to their small circles of security and submission. It is interesting to observe how Tolstoy dwells on this last case because he thinks that such is the situation of most Russian peasants. From this point on in his reflections he is always mindful of the peasants because he has discovered in them a

religious faith in the God who saves and gives meaning to suffering; this faith gives them life despite their painful submission. «I discovered then that the people's faith is a type of knowledge which allows them to live in peace». The peasants' idea of the God who saves them did not correspond precisely to the ideas of theologians; rather, it was the mysterious reality of infinite Life by which they feel blessed «because without God there is no life» (Chapter XII).

Starting from this conviction, Tolstoy studied what happens in other religions practiced by large numbers of people. He concluded that those other immense masses of humiliated and maltreated humanity also have faith in the God of Life, and that is what saves

them. That was what Tolstoy himself experienced in his frequent encounters with his own peasants as he accompanied them in long hours of prayer and other Orthodox religious practices. He felt that he was in solid communion with millions of simple folk.

At the same time he realized with ever greater clarity that it was precisely pride and the desire for wealth of so many powerful and educated persons that hid from them the deep meaning of existence, as had also been the case with himself. He therefore from that point on never stopped repeating that those were exactly the ideas that Jesus proposed with great clarity in his Gospel.<sup>2</sup>

Tolstoy entered into a state of permanent rebellion against the abuses of the public powers, and as a new convert he became indignant at the way the Orthodox Church understood and explained the Christian faith. He denounced the church's dogmatic rigor and its close alliance with the dominant political regime. For him these were completely contrary to the Gospel (Chapters XIV-XVI).

#### **4.2. «Religious resurrection»**

These new religious sentiments and related views, to which Tolstoy adhered until the end of his life, were often not well thought out and would sometimes stray from orthodoxy. As a result, the Russian Orthodox Synod soon admonished him and ended up excommunicating him in 1901. Curiously, the immediate cause of this severe sanction was one of his last great novels, *Resur-*

*rection* (1899), in which he tried to express symbolically his own return to the Christian faith. The novel is the story of the conversion of a Russian prince who has been a great sinner but who is now obliged to pass judgment in court on a girl whom he abused and abandoned ten years before. The court accuses the girl unjustly of murder and sentences her to life imprisonment in Siberia. The prince, who was not able to get her acquitted, is now profoundly moved and repentant. In order to receive her pardon he follows her to the prison, and finally she forgives him out of love. In order to do penance for his offenses, the prince renounces his family and all his properties and dedicates himself to living as a hermit, spending long hours meditating on the Gospel.

#### **4.3. «Political resurrection»**

It was clear that this novel described not only a «religious resurrection» but also a «political resurrection», that is, a radical transformation of this aristocrat's way of understanding the victims of political power. When he visits the Siberian prison colony, the prince gets to know some of the revolutionary workers who are being punished there, and he comes to admire and respect them for their willingness to sacrifice themselves in the struggle against injustice. This novel also denounces a series of social and political wrongs and condemns the corrupt tribunals of justice, the abuse of servants by the upper class, the extreme cruelty of the penal system, the imposition of the death penalty without appeal, and other

injustices. For Tolstoy all this is directly related to his own complete conversion to the Gospel of Jesus, which in God's name demands renunciation of violence and advocates mutual love, pardon, and mercy.

#### **4.4. The Kingdom of God is among you**

These themes are the same as those presented in an essay Tolstoy published in 1893 with the title, *The Kingdom of God is Among You*. Here also he insists on the evangelical precept of never returning evil for evil and never doing harm to one's neighbor or even one's enemy since the greatest commandment is to love one another as brothers and

sisters, children of the same Father. Since Tolstoy himself was still struggling with his own disordered way of life, he thought that the most important way to reach this ideal was to eradicate the unjust arrogance with which masters still treated their servants. Consequently, at the end of this famous book the author insists on the need to struggle against pride, to become detached from all superfluous goods, and always to avoid lying. As a way of dominating these passions he recommends fasting, sobriety in everything, and working in the fields with the peasants. Only in this way will the Kingdom of God, which has already come, become firmly established in this perverse world.

## 5. AN OFFICIAL OF THE CZAR WHO REPUDIATES WAR

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Following the example of his older brother Nicholas, a captain in the Hussars, Count Leo Tolstoy enlisted voluntarily in the czar's army at age 23. He fought in the Crimea campaign from which he emerged with the rank of lieutenant. However, the experience of death and carnage he had during the campaign was so horrible that he soon left the military. In so doing he went against the tradition of his illustrious military forebears, one of whom was a general in the wars against Napoleon.

### 5.1. An essay on war

Tolstoy's repudiation of war was so profound that from that moment on he never stopped expressing his anti-military views in public, in private, or even in his writings. Soon after those terrible war experiences he published the three volumes of *Sebastopol* (1854-55) about the blood-drenched defense of Crimea. Once he was peacefully settled into Yasnaya Poliana, he dedicated himself to writing his monumental work, *War and Peace*, which dealt with the Napoleonic campaigns in Russia. In the course of this story the

author inserts into the text with a certain frequency his opinions about the events narrated –insertions that bother some naïve readers. Tolstoy wanted this master work to be seen not just as another novel about the war but as an «epic essay» which featured characters and events that were both historical and fictitious but also accompanied them with the author's political and moral reflections. Moreover, faithful to his growing concern for the common folk, this philosopher-novelist refused to consider the principal protagonists of those extended military campaigns to be the generals or the politicians –not

even Napoleon or Alexander I or Kutuzov. Rather the real champions were the great masses of villagers and soldiers since they were the ones who participated most personally in the battles and suffered most directly the disasters of that great war. Tolstoy especially wanted to highlight the role of that immense throng of Russian peasants who had been obliged to become cannon fodder. As far as history goes, they were certainly anonymous, but for Tolstoy they, along with their families, were the true heroes of all those deeds.

### 5.2. Closeness to those who suffer

That was how Tolstoy understood the reality, and that was how his intense pedagogical urge inspired him to communicate it to his readers. What is truly admirable is the serene, benevolent, and compassionate manner in which this anti-war rebel succeeded in conveying his ideas. He used no ideological slogans but simply tried to portray respectfully all those who suffered in the war: the peasant militiamen on both sides, the troops and their officers, the poor village folk, and even the upper-class families. All of them in their own way were victims of the grim ogre of war. He gives a good example of the intimacy that can exist among distressed human beings despite social differences when he recounts the conversation between a peasant militiaman named Plato and the intellectual rebel Pierre Bezukov in a French camp for prisoners of war.<sup>3</sup> In describing individuals exposed to death, Tolstoy shows

how they are overcome by the very human and also religious sentiments that he had never forgotten from that middle phase of his own life. Consider, for example, the thoughts of Prince Andrew after he has been wounded in battle: «Love conceals death because love is God and dying means that I am an atom of that love returning to the eternal source».<sup>4</sup>

### 5.3. The unnecessary war

Of course, since our author was writing so earnestly about the war, he could not help but ask about the causes for such a horrendous and far-reaching crime. Many of his interventions in *War and Peace* are dedicated precisely to this serious question, including the 80 pages of the epilogue. Faced with the impossibility of responding adequately to such a sweeping question, he wondered how some writers could understand the war as necessary and therefore just. In his perplexity Tolstoy reproached the authors of war novels that never even bothered to ask such questions, and he also rejected the modern historians who saw war as necessary on the Darwinian principle that survival among humans means eliminating one's enemies. Years later, following his conversion, Tolstoy condemned this mentality which held that «war is inevitable», seeing pride and not instinct as being the principal cause of this crime. He considered pride to be the most horrendous of human passions. Because it is freely consented to, it generates the equally lethal passions of envy and hatred to

reinforce its destructive satanic force, as we see in the biblical myth of Cain's crime against Abel.

#### **5.4. Controlling the passions**

Toward the end of his life Tolstoy reaffirmed his rejection of all violence—physical, moral, and structural—and he began a public campaign. He wrote and preached on the importance of controlling the passions, which he saw as the cause of all moral evil. He imposed extreme austerity on himself and strove to deprive himself of all harmful stimuli. He was inspired by the Gospel

of Jesus which reveals that peace among mortals is achieved only by overcoming the arrogance of self-will and by practicing humility, mercy, and fraternal love, even toward one's enemies.<sup>5</sup>

Among the followers of this pacifist rebel was Gandhi, who was still a young lawyer in South Africa at the time. Gandhi read Tolstoy's work and wrote several letters to the author professing complete allegiance to his program. Later when confronting the British empire in India, Gandhi developed a style of pacifism (*Ahimsa*) that was in accord with the Hindu tradition of purification and self-sacrifice.

## 6. A POPULIST, UTOPIAN SOCIALIST

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Leo Tolstoy was not really a politician; he was man truly concerned about the society of his time. He was a reformer and a moral thinker interested above all in the idea of justice in all its manifestations.

He was also an activist and a magnificent propagandist thanks to his extraordinary mastery of the written word. His interest in politics in the noblest and broadest sense of the term led him to study in depth the principal political and economic systems of his times, both in Russia and the rest of Europe. He had frequent conversations with socialists who were returning from Europe, some of whom he hired as teachers for his children. His main purpose in all his extraordinary activism was to find the most suitable means for reforming the system of absolute monarchy that then held sway in Russia.

### 6.1. A socialism of love

The socialist thought coming from the West was of great interest to Tolstoy thanks above all to the teachings being disseminated by exiled writers such as Bielinski and Herzen. Nevertheless, he never fully accepted the «scientific» socialism proposed by Marx and Engels because of its materialism and its advocacy of revolutionary violence and class struggle. What most bothered Tolstoy about Marx was his incitement of hatred and his will to power; there was nothing in his writings about fraternal love, only vague mention of love of liberty or an illusory hope for a

classless society. «What always surprised me in Marx's writings is that they contain nothing about love; all is hatred, ambition, and will to power. [...] All those base emotions are disguised with the pretext of an abstract and impossible love for the people» (*Diary*, 13 February 1907). Despite these reservations, Tolstoy accepted some key elements of Marxist doctrine, such as the need for workers to recover the real value of their labor instead of just the market value. (On this topic see the very interesting essay by Tolstoy, *Money and Labor*, 1886)<sup>6</sup>. We are quite familiar with the never-ending struggle Tolstoy waged against the owners of large estates and other forms of massive private property since their abuse of power weighed heavily on many millions of Russian peasants. Moreover, some of the books he wrote later in life were clearly socialist and revolutionary, among them such works as *The Slavery of Our Time* (1900) and *To the Working Class* (1902). Among unfinished works that were found after his death was a critique titled *On Socialism*, which was published posthumously (1910).

## 6.2. Mystical socialism

Consequently I believe that Tolstoy's political thought was basically socialist, though with great reservations. His socialism was more the «utopian» type in that it favored the historical current of Saint-Simon, Fourier, Owen, and others. He agreed, for example, with the theory of organizing the people in small workers' societies (communes) and labor cooperatives which preserved

the dignity and freedom of individuals. Tolstoy actually proposed such a scheme for Russian farm workers, as his essay *The End of the Century* explains in detail. This was a program also proposed by the «populist» movements with which he felt in close harmony.

Tolstoy's anti-capitalist, socialist spirit was also manifest in the harsh moral judgments he formulated against the bourgeois liberal system of the West. He traveled to Europe (France, England, and Switzerland) only twice, but both times he returned disillusioned by the state of those societies and their democratic systems. «The actual situation of those peoples who claim to govern themselves (democracy) is nothing more than the result of complex power struggles and intrigues among parties and the insatiable thirst for power of some very rich individuals. ... The system of universal suffrage diffuses the desire for power by multiplying the number of centers and individuals who hold it». Tolstoy also claimed to be scandalized by the lifestyle of many wealthy European bourgeoisie who squandered money on extremely expensive works of art and startlingly lavish feasts. His vehement rejection of art and poetry (including Shakespeare) toward the end of his life was due to his conviction that the bourgeoisie had made art into merchandise. His distaste for Shakespeare was also due to the English genius's excessive use of subtle wordplay.

Despite these convergences and discrepancies, Tolstoy adhered to a profound socialism with transcendent

religious roots. More than utopian, his socialism was evangelical in its firm belief in the human fraternity that God promises. That is why at one point he noted down in his diary that «this socialism is a minimal application of Christianity, to which [Marxism] is unfaithful because of its serious lack of morality» (31 July 1905).

If we apply to Tolstoy Albert Camus's lucid distinction between revolution and rebellion,<sup>7</sup> our author would certainly not have been a revolutionary desirous of power but a true «man in rebellion», constant and even heroic in his manner. Disagreeing, then, with the revolutionary socialism of the West, as well as with the nihilist anarchism of Russia, this old rebel now allied himself to a new Russian reform movement, populism.

### 6.3. Russian «populism»

Around the middle of the 19th century there arose in Russia a series of poorly organized grass-roots movements that sought to defend the countless people living in extreme poverty and lacking legal protection. The movements included not a few intellectuals, revolutionaries, repentant nobles, and dissident monks and Christians, all of whom were grieved by the extreme misery of the masses. They drew their original inspiration from the socialist-humanist writings that Alexander Herzen sent from exile, but they also had great respect for the people's culture and traditional Slavic values and were concerned to preserve the people's reli-

gion. The thinker Nicolai Chernichevski soon assumed leadership in these movements; he became famous for his book *What Can We Do?*, in which he proposed some short-term, concrete ways to respond to the deplorable social conditions. Chernichevski was a simple, honest man, but he was also a good organizer; he preached not only social reform but moral reform based on self-sacrifice and increased non-violent solidarity. At that time in Russia such populism clearly could not take the form of a political party, nor it should be understood in terms of what is sometimes called «populist» politics in our day, meaning demagogic and rightward-leaning.

The rapid spread of these groups in Tolstoy's time reflected the extreme discontent and indignation that many people experienced as well as the urgent need they felt to take action against that appalling situation. This explains why Tolstoy himself was very partial to this movement which also took an interest in the education of the peasants. In the populist movements of the time there was a convergence of intense social concern and Christian belief, and the latter sometimes took on apocalyptic tones. Without going to such extremes, Tolstoy repeatedly voiced his belief, as I have already stated, that a sounder, more just universal order could arise only when human beings overcame their passions and their pride. And this was precisely the criticism that the Russian Marxists leveled against the populists. Lenin himself criticized Tolstoy, whom he admired, for offering such intangible

hopes and proposing a peaceful revolution that would be exceedingly slow.

It is possible that Tolstoy became aware of this on his own, which would explain his discrepancies with Chernichevski and his distancing himself from populism, which seemed to him too conservative and timid in its struggle

against political power. That the fiery lord of Yasnaya Poliana should be unhappy with populism is quite comprehensible, but his break from the populist movement only reinforced his certainty of having received a new, transcendent mission, the mission of prophet.

## 7. TOLSTOY THE PROPHET

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I will not use this term here in the biblical sense of exceptional persons inspired by God to proclaim his promises and condemnations. Nevertheless, I think the term «prophet» can be fittingly applied to Leo Tolstoy, as other scholars have already done.<sup>8</sup>

### 7.1. Inspired by the Gospel

He did in fact have great insight into the perverse social reality in which he lived, and he was courageous in the judgments he passed on it. Not only did he denounce serious injustices, but he promised people hope and did so, moreover, deeply inspired by the Gospel of Jesus.

Even as a young man Tolstoy had a restless nature that rebelled against anything that prevented him from personally knowing the true meaning of life, not only in theory but in his concrete experience. This rebellious spirit led him to reject first university

studies and then his military career. Slowly but with great determination he came to understand the horrible circumstances in which most of his compatriots were living, both in the outlying areas of Moscow –which he canvassed with great emotion while taking a census– and in the vast rural areas, including his own estates, where millions of peasants were suffering intolerably. It was, however, his profound emotional crisis and the subsequent religious conversion at age fifty that provoked in him a drastic reaction of protest and an anxious search for more transcendent solutions. To some extent he found these solutions in the

major revolutionary movements outside Russia, whose principles he experimented with in his own life and in his writings even as he assessed their advantages and contradictions.

## **7.2. Determined anarchist, eager socialist... evangelical prophet**

Thus we begin to see this new Tolstoy, aged but still vigorous. He was an anarchist opposed to the state and all its repressive apparatus, but he did not yield in his deep conviction that the harsh violence of the powerful should never be resisted with violence. The new Tolstoy was also a supporter of socialism, whose doctrine he rejected in part but whose hope for a new society he enthusiastically embraced. Finally, Tolstoy was also a defender of the popular reforms that the Russian authorities were beginning to tolerate. He especially favored the reforms of the populist movement although later

he became impatient with their half-hearted revolutionary spirit.

This rebellious aristocrat who defied his monarch experienced these allegiances and contradictions in ways that were at times painful and even disruptive of peace in his home. These vying forces gained even greater potency in his spirit, however, when he underwent his radical conversion to the Gospel of Jesus, which expanded his struggles and hopes into an absolute horizon. The result was a dramatic increase in his personal remonstrations, as well as in the family tensions and public protests (against the police, for example, or the Orthodox Church). The situation was not helped by the fact that he simply could not keep quiet; he had to proclaim his message against all odds. In sum, I believe that we are totally justified in granting the title «prophet» to the gigantic spirit that was Leo Tolstoy. He was a great evangelical prophet, as well as a moral and political one.

## 8. MORAL, POLITICAL, AND EVANGELICAL PROPHECYING

We should keep in mind that this intense prophetic vocation of Tolstoy never ceased to be socially and politically noteworthy. We have already mentioned Tolstoy's constant denunciations against the absolutist Russian regime in his early literary works.

### **8.1. A subversive Kingdom**

There are countless invectives against what today we call «structural violence» as well as against the suppression of liberty and the cruelty of penal punishment. These condemnations were always pregnant with serious moral content in their defense of justice and especially of charity toward the most dispossessed and marginalized persons of both the city and the countryside. In its daring denunciations of solidly established powers, the vigorous voice of Tolstoy must have sounded to many people like the voice of a «prophet crying out in the desert», but it was

often eagerly heard by those who listened to him and read his books. These people were especially consoled by the protests that Tolstoy voiced but that they themselves could not or did not know how to express. Their appreciation was borne out by many of the letters that he received daily in the last stage of his life.

Tolstoy's pronouncements had considerable effect in a society that was beginning to feel great indignation at the many great injustices, and this effect was reinforced by his personal example for he confessed himself to be a sinner and applied to himself the same

moral corrective he was preaching. In proposing his «five commandments of a revolutionary», for example, he was describing his own efforts to live up to them. His precepts were very practical, such as not getting irritated, not committing adultery, not swearing falsely, not resisting evil with violence, and above all loving others as one loves oneself. Like the ancient prophets, Tolstoy also preached radical moral conversion and frequently cried out, «Do penance!». As a result of his full recovery of religious spirit, this prophet was no longer content with offering simply ethical motivations but always appealed to confidence in the power of God, who for him was above all the God of love and mercy. This was the doctrine of Jesus that Tolstoy had found in the Gospels.

«I believe in God who is the Spirit of Love and the principle of everything. ... I believe that the meaning of life for every one of us consists solely in growing in love of God. [...] In this life such love will bring us a blessedness that grows day by day, and in the other world the most perfect happiness.»<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, our prophet's religious conviction was also strengthened by his constant dealings with the peasants («they restored to me the basis of my faith», he writes in *My Confession*, chapter XIII). In fact, he was convinced that their faith was what gave the poor of this world the strength they needed to survive and move forward. That is why one of the Gospel sayings that Tolstoy repeated often was «Seek first

the kingdom of God and its justice, and all the rest will be given to you in addition». (For example, that is how he concluded his work, *The Kingdom of God is Among You*.)

## 8.2. Adherence to Jesus

In another of his essays, *Religion and Morality* (1893), Tolstoy argued that «a lay morality unrelated to religion cannot survive». It's true that the theological baggage of our prophet was neither very broad nor very orthodox; it did not always conform to the dogmas and precepts of the Russian synod, which he considered excessively onerous. His independent, rebellious temperament perhaps makes his heterodoxy more understandable, but there can be no doubt about the extraordinary adherence Tolstoy felt to the figure of Christ, historical and heavenly at the same time, the Christ who was going to come again at the end of history as an assurance for believers both in this life and after death. His constant references in his books to the doctrine of Jesus, especially as found in John's gospel and the «Sermon on the Mount», make it clear that Tolstoy the prophet was also «evangelical». The Gospel themes he cited most often were those of never returning evil for evil, loving others as oneself, giving more than what is requested, etc.

Another distinctive feature of Tolstoy's prophetic character was that he almost never appeared as a herald of terrible calamities or as a foreteller of utopian paradises. Faced with a morally corrupt social situation, he did not trust

only in human forces. He trusted even less in the forces of the revolutionary socialists because he sensed that their revolution would be very brutal. He feared that they would do no more than replace the existing regime with another just as autocratic and would besides «extinguish the last reserves of freedom»<sup>10</sup>. As a pacifist Tolstoy was even less motivated than before by any will to gain power. He sensed that a superior force was somehow moving him «as an envoy of God» (*Diary*, 11 August 1893), whom he desired to serve «not as a private individual but as his ambassador» (*Diary*, 12 July 1900)<sup>11</sup>. As a result, his proposals became now even more transcendent. There can be no doubt that Tolstoy in his final years, full of confidence in the coming of God's kingdom, was convinced that a new age of happiness was arriving for all.

«I believe that at this very moment the great revolution that has been in the making for two thousands years is truly becoming reality.»

«We find ourselves on the threshold of a new life. ... In order to attain it we need only to free ourselves from the superstition that violence is necessary and accept instead the eternal principle of love.»

(*The End of the Century*, 1905).<sup>12</sup>

### 8.3. A figure always present

To end this essay, we should ask about the reception that this great moral teacher had in his own country and elsewhere, as well as consider how

Tolstoy might be made better known as a prophet in our world today. We should first recognize that there were and still are critics who consider his proposals as extremely idealist and of little «scientific» efficacy in the political realm. Many conservatives, scandalized by his anarchism and heterodoxy, criticized Count Tolstoy mercilessly, but he still had many admirers and followers. Even among revolutionary Marxists he was praised for his radical opposition to the absolutist regime and for his repudiation of private property. Lenin himself went so far as to call him the «patriarch of the revolution».

Apart from these revolutionaries, there were many others who felt strongly drawn to his example and his teaching. The state and the church had prohibited the circulation of many of Tolstoy's writing in Russia, but they still were published clandestinely and were translated into French and English abroad, where they reached ever wider audiences. In fact, from 1890 on many thousands of pilgrims came to visit this patriarch of Yasnaya Poliana, and groups were organized all around the country with the aim of living in accord with what the master preached, especially his teachings regarding pacifism, conscientious objection, elimination of large landholdings, and Christian solidarity. This growing and very diversified «Tolstoyan» movement included young persecuted intellectuals, dissident monks, a few converted nobles, teachers, and journalists, all moved by a great desire to transform the situation in Russia. Tolstoy also received countless letters from abroad (twelve large

volumes in the *Complete Works* published in Russian in 1925). Many letters came from intellectuals in Great Britain, France, and Switzerland, but also from the United States and Canada, where groups of his followers were organized. In addition, there were at least two magazines published: *The Free World* in London and *La Libre Pensée* in Geneva.<sup>13</sup> We should also remember that the subtle and very humane dramatist Anton Chekhov was one of Tolstoy's many illustrious Russian literary disciples. Among Spanish writers Tolstoy's contemporary admirers included the likes of E. Pardo Bazán, B. Pérez Galdós, Clarín, Unamuno, Narcís Oller, and Joan Maragall. Finally, we should keep in mind that the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 and the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 suddenly eclipsed the memory of Tolstoy in all of

Europe for several years, but it was timidly restored again in 1928 when the first centenary of his birth was celebrated.

Thinkers have not been lacking –Stefan Zweig, for example– who saw Leo Tolstoy as one of the great idealists of history who ended up as a failure, as did Don Quixote. But we should ask ourselves: did Don Quixote really fail? It's true that he was often defeated, but people were never able to curb his will to keep fighting for a better world, and that's why his figure has always remained alive as an inspiring moral symbol. So also should we understand the destiny of Leo Tolstoy. He was imperfect and contradictory if you wish, but he was indomitable in his firm determination to proclaim a better society for all and to work hard to bring it about.



## NOTES

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1. Romain ROLLAND, *Vida de León Tolstoi (1911)*, Ediciones La Nave, Madrid, 1935, pp. 115-116. The author explains: «I am resuming here several pages of *My Confession* while preserving Tolstoy's expressions».
2. See chapters VI-IX of *My Confession*.
3. *War and Peace*, Book XIII, chap. XI.
4. *Ibid.*, Book XII, chap. XVI.
5. See, for example, Tolstoy's essay, *On Power and Goodness* (1888).
6. Like Marx, Tolstoy saw that money had ceased to be a means and had become an end or a supreme value and that this was to the detriment of the labor value of the worker, whose merit and dignity were measured by the banking system and the stock exchange.
7. This theme is developed superbly in Camus's 1951 essay, *Man in Rebellion*.
8. This is precisely the title of the interesting study, *Tolstoi, il profeta. Invito alla lettura degli scritti filosofico-religiosi*. Edit. Gabrielli, Verona 2000.
9. *Mi credo* (1901), quoted by ROLLAND, op. cit., p. 128.
10. See *The End of the Century* [1905] and *On Socialism* [1910].
11. Quotes are taken from *Tolstoi, il profeta*, p. 63.
12. *Ibid.*, last page.
13. For more complete information about Tolstoy's influence, an indispensable resource is the recent, well documented work of Rosamund Barlett, *Tolstoy. A Russian Life*. London 2010.



# QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

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From an early age but especially after his personal crisis at around age 50, Tolstoy possessed a temperament that rebelled against the social injustices that oppressed the poor, the servants, and the workers of Russia. He never stopped asking the question «What must we do?» because he wanted with all his heart to change the unjust political situation in Russia. His most frequent answers and also his concrete proposals were these:

- To know better the reality and the causes of these injustices.
- To help the poor, the servants, and the workers in constant, practical ways.
- To organize better education and health clinics for children and illiterate adults.
- To give alms to charitable organizations rather than to individuals.
- To fight against all forms of violence, both individual and «structural» (laws, military, police, prisons, death penalty, etc.).
- To be well informed about the proposals for social and political reform of revolutionary European thinkers and also of Russians in exile.
- To publicize these ideas far and wide at all times.
- Finally, to remember that all these ideas and activities are always motivated by our passionate faith in the Gospel of Jesus.

## **1. Which of Tolstoy's proposals seem to you to be most valid for today?**

## **2. After reading this booklet, how might we define Tolstoy?**

- Was he a «pacifist anarchist»? A rebellious aristocrat but also a defender of non-violence?
- Was he a «self-critical, benevolent revolutionary» who aspired to radical changes, but always through the fully evangelical path of fraternal love and personal self-sacrifice?
- Was he a «socialist mystic» though certainly not «scientific» (unlike Hegel, Marx, or Lenin)?
- Was he instead a utopian socialist in the evangelical sense of the «Kingdom of God in our midst»?

- Was he a «dissident populist» with little tendency toward traditionalism, conservatism, or Slavic nationalism?
- Was he instead a naturalist in the spirit of Rousseau and a (somewhat libertarian) romantic?
- Was he a «heterodox religious prophet», mystically enamored of Christ the prophet but also of Isaiah and Jeremiah?
- Was he a great evangelical prophet but one excommunicated by Russian Orthodoxy?

**3. Which of these attitudes continue to have validity today? Which are the ones we most need in the situation in which we find ourselves?**



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Roger de Llúria, 13 - 08010 Barcelona

Tel: 93 317 23 38 - [info@fespinal.com](mailto:info@fespinal.com)

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