

On Putin's War and Injustices Faced by Ukrainians: Lessons on Nonviolent Love, Peace, and Truth from the Correspondence between Tolstoy and Gandhi

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I write this article while Russian bombs are falling on Ukraine. According to news reports, thousands of people have been killed and more than five million have fled Ukraine—women, children, and the vulnerable.

My heart breaks as I see the pictures of death and destruction in Ukraine. In the 1990s, I taught a few modular courses in Odessa, Ukraine. At that time, the Soviet Union had just broken up and there was much excitement in the air. Odessa is a Black Sea port city with a rich cultural and educational heritage. My classes were held a few blocks from the famous Deribasovskaya Street. This street is like Michigan Avenue in Chicago, or Broadway in New York City. Just across from this street is a short walk to the Primorsky (Potemkin) Stairs leading to the Odessa Port. I have fond memories of discussing theology with my students as we walked down Deribasovskaya Street and the Primorsky Stairs.

The economy in Ukraine was just starting to open up. I could hop into a car and pay the driver in cash to get to my destination. My lectures in Odessa were based on the interpretation of the Hebrew prophets as found in the writings of a Jewish philosopher by the name of Emmanuel Levinas.¹ In interpreting the prophets of the Old Testament, Levinas wrote about

¹ At the time of my lectures, Emmanuel Levinas's writings were not yet translated from French into other languages, and his thought was new to the English-speaking world. The following are some of his key writings: *Nine Talmudic Readings*, trans. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990); *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*,

encountering the face of God in the face of the “other.” In general, his thought is regarded as a post-Holocaust reading of the Hebrew prophets.²

Many of my students were Ukrainian Jews. These were Jewish people who had fled from Russia into Ukraine because they had suffered much anti-Semitism under successive reigns of Russian regimes. On our walks down Deribasovskaya Street, we frequently encountered experiences that caused us to reflect on my lectures. We saw limousines pull up to the curb, and from those opulent vehicles emerged young families with expensive, all-leather clothing, and mink overcoats. These were the *nouveau riche* Russian mafia who ruled the economy of Ukraine. On the other side of the street, we saw Ukrainian *babusya* (grandmothers) climb into the garbage dumpster, perhaps to find a piece of bread to satisfy their hunger.

Something was drastically wrong with this picture. We discussed the ramifications for the future of Ukrainian society—while keeping the incisive thoughts of the Hebrew prophets and Emmanuel Levinas in our minds. I am still in touch with those students. The women and children have fled to Moldova and Romania while the men have returned to defend their beloved Ukraine.

In this essay, I would like to underline the importance of reading two crucial thinkers: Leo Tolstoy, one of the greatest thinkers of Russia, and Mohandas Gandhi, one the greatest thinkers of India. Both thinkers stressed peace and not war, nonviolence and not violence, life and not death, care for the low castes and outcastes³, and not destruction of the marginalized of India and Ukraine.⁴

trans. Seán Hand (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012); *Entre Nous*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (London: Bloomsbury, 2017). More recently, several universities and biblical forums have conducted conferences to discuss Levinas as a Hebrew Bible exegete. One such conference, the Corcoran Chair Conference, was held on March 18–19, 2012, at Boston College.

² See R. Clifton Spargo, *Vigilant Memory: Emmanuel Levinas, the Holocaust, and the Unjust Death* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Didier Pollefeyt, “Theology as Ethics: Emmanuel Levinas as Jewish Post-Holocaust Thinker,” in *The Value of the Particular: Lessons from Judaism and the Modern Jewish Experience: Festschrift for Steven T. Katz on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, Supplements to the Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy, vol. 25 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2015), 322–39.

³ Hinduism was brought into India by the Aryans around 1750 BC. They captured and destroyed the original Indus Valley civilization, then divided society into different castes. The Aryans themselves assumed the three highest castes: the Brahmins (or priests), the Kshatriyas (or the princes and warriors), and the Vaishyas (or the business caste). The original dwellers of India were divided into the Shudras (or the low caste) and the Achoot (or outcastes/untouchables).

My Personal Background

My early years. My search for the meaning of life began quite early. I was not raised in the lap of luxury; I grew up in one of the slums of New Delhi. I saw poverty and excrement all around me. I saw high caste Hindus take poor people from the low castes into slavery—sexual slavery, carpet industry slavery, etc. To escape this reality, my parents sent me to a Hindu Grammar School, far removed from the slum. At this school, I was trained in Sanskrit and the monistic Hindu texts of the Upanishads. Historically, only the highest caste Hindu boys were allowed to open these texts. I learned the skills of *Jnana Marga*, the “way of Hindu Gnostic Knowledge.” (A kindergarten version of it may be seen in yoga classes, popular today in the West).

When I walked to this school from the slum—about a six-mile walk—I faced a dilemma. I encountered two different realities. One was the reality of poverty and injustice among my low caste (Shudra) and outcaste (Dalit) neighbors and friends. The other was the reality of high caste Hindu classmates and learning. At school, I would ask the question, “How do these realities come together?” My gurus told me that the greatest goal of learning was the realization that life is *shunyata*, “nothingness,” and that this “apparent life” was an illusion, *maya*. On the one hand, I was learning the reality of sciences and literature, yet on the other hand, in my *jnana marga* classes, I was taught that life was *maya*, an illusion. So, I asked myself, “If humanity and the universe were nothing, *shunyata*, what was the point of education?” The question took on another dimension when I related it to the inhumanity and suffering I saw daily when I returned to the slum where I lived. These injustices and violent crimes were meted out to low-caste and outcaste people in my slum by high caste slave-owners. I asked my guru, “Why do the poor and outcastes suffer?” He told me that human beings live in this realm of *maya* and must suffer the consequences of their *karma*. My questions kept multiplying: Should I then just overlook all that I was learning in the arts and the sciences,

⁴ As of the final editorial stages of this article, we, in the USA, are engaging with devastating news of violence and killings—the killing of 10 Black people in a grocery store in Buffalo, New York, by a white supremacist; the massacre of 19 elementary school children and their two teachers (mainly Latina and Latino) in Uvalde, Texas; and the mass shooting of medical personnel in Tulsa, Oklahoma, by their own patient. This is awful. In his address to the nation on June 1, 2022, President Biden, with much pain and emotion exclaimed, “Enough, enough!” This series of killings makes it more necessary for us, in the USA, to listen to the voices of Tolstoy and Gandhi, today.

since people will suffer the consequences of their *karma* anyway? Was the goal of life just to enable the high caste “haves” to enjoy the results of learning, while “outcaste have-nots” must suffer the consequences of their *karma*? These were among the plethora of questions which formed my quest for answers about the meaning of life and learning.

In high school I encountered the writings of a woman named Pandita Ramabai. She rescued hundreds of low caste and outcaste girls during the last pandemic in the early twentieth century. She did this after her own life was transformed by Jesus the Messiah. I also met a Sikh, Bhakt Singh, whose life was also transformed by Jesus. He planted churches in the slums of India and gave poor, enslaved people freedom through Christ. He also fed them food, so that they would be nourished to free themselves from high caste slavery. I decided to follow this Jesus of Pandita Ramabai and Bhakt Singh.

My quest for theology. In my twenties, I began studying at Union Biblical Seminary in Yavatmal, India. I wanted to formulate a theology for ministry in India. However, I soon realized that Indian Christian theology was not meant for 80 percent of Indians, who are low caste and outcaste. Two philosophical frameworks have dominated the development of Indian Christian theologies. First, there was the colonial framework, espoused by those theologians trained in Western methodology. Still today, this is the majority paradigm in both mainline and evangelically oriented seminaries. Indian theological students are asked to conform to Western, historical-critical methodologies, which have antisemitic roots. These include the study of Wellhausen and Bultmann, for instance.⁵ Second, there is the Brahmanical framework, which is espoused by a powerful group of theologians who came from the dominant priestly caste of Hindu society.⁶ Along with the first framework, this is largely the framework of most models of biblical interpretation and Indian Christian

⁵ Sadly, influential German biblical scholarship (such as Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, trans. J. S. Black [Edinburgh: A & C Black, 1885], and Rudolf Karl Bultmann, *The New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, trans. Schubert Miles Ogden [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984]) has its roots in German anti-Semitism. A good study of this phenomenon may be found in Anders Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism: German Biblical Interpretation and the Jews, from Herder and Semler to Kittel and Bultmann* (Leiden: Brill, 2010). This anti-Semitism is akin to high caste anti-outcasteism in India.

⁶ My textbooks for the study of Indian Christian theology set up before me only high caste theologians as my heroes. These were such theologians as Brahmobandhav Upadhyay, Keshabchandra Sen, Narayan Vaman Tilak. The underlying message was that if one is low caste or outcaste, one cannot become a good Christian theologian.

theology. This is the case although more than 88 percent of Christians come from low-caste or outcaste backgrounds, i.e., *Shudra* and *Ati-shudra* families. Just 12 percent of the church in India comes from high caste families. Yet the interpretive and theological framework of the church is led by the minority group of high caste leaders and theologians.⁷

I travel quite often to India, the land of my birth. I serve as the honorary head of the Department of Advanced Theological Studies at a Christian university called Sam Higginbottom University of Agricultural and Technological Sciences (SHUATS). It is in a city called Allahabad, which means the City of Allah. There is much tension between Hindus and Muslims in this city. The state government is ruled by a Hindu nationalist party called the Bharatiya Janta Party. The same party rules the whole country from the capital, New Delhi. This government is seeking to change the names of cities like Allahabad into Hindu names and has officially changed the name of Allahabad to Prayagraj. The meaning of this new name refers to the rule of three holy rivers and the gods associated with these rivers—the Ganges, the Yamuna, and another mythical river called the Saraswati. It is also called the Triveni Sangam, the meeting of the holy trinity of rivers. Prayagraj is a crucial center of Hinduism. Every year, millions of Hindus travel to this city on pilgrimage.

In the new Hindu India, there has been a huge increase in the persecution of minorities such as Muslims and Christians. There is much violence against minorities and increasing violence against the outcastes (the Dalits) and low castes (the Shudras). I often ask these questions: What has happened to the land of Gandhi? What has happened to non-violence? What has happened to Gandhian love? What has happened to Gandhian peace? These are the questions which consume my thoughts whenever I go back to India to teach my PhD seminars.

My two worlds and the third world. I live in two worlds: the Western world, in Chicago, and the Eastern world, in Allahabad. The above stories and resultant questions flood my mind as I now think about the ethnic cleansing unleashed by President Putin on Ukraine. I would

⁷ See further Neha Sahgal, Jonathan Evans, Ariana Monique Salazar, Kelsey Jo Starr, and Manolo Corichi, “Religion in India: Tolerance and Segregation,” *Pew Research Center Report*, June 29, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/06/29/religion-in-india-tolerance-and-segregation>. Accessed March 30, 2022. Note also, Ariana Monique Salazar, “Eight Key Findings about Christians in India,” *Pew Research Center Report*, July 12, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/07/12/8-key-findings-about-christians-in-india>. Accessed March 30, 2022.

argue that the high caste Russian society seeks to eradicate a low-caste Ukrainian society. In the process, Putin is seeking to build an empire ruled by high caste Russians. This is no different from the Aryan eradication and subjugation of low-caste/outcaste and tribal societies of India. The Aryans from the Caucasus came to India around 1750 BC. They eradicated the Indus Valley Civilization and established Hinduism in India. The most vulnerable in India are still suffering the consequences of the Aryan takeover of the peace-loving peoples of the Indus Valley Civilization. Gandhi had to face this reality, first in South Africa and then in India.

Early Years of Gandhi in South Africa and Tolstoy

Gandhi was reared in a high caste family in Porbandar.⁸ He gained his law degree and license in London because he was high caste and able to finance his own education. He went to South Africa in 1893 as a twenty-four-year-old lawyer for Dada Abdullah and Sons. This is where he was thrown out of a train at Pietermaritzburg, in the Zulu Natal province—a wake-up call for Gandhi. I have taken North Park students to the train station where he was thrown off the train.

In South Africa, Gandhi encountered high caste Indians who had gone to South Africa as traders. Most Indians in South Africa, low-caste and outcaste people already enslaved by high-cast Aryans in India, were taken to South Africa by the Afrikaans and British to be enslaved there. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, most of these slaves were from East and South India.

When slavery was abolished throughout the British Empire in 1833, these slaves became indentured servants. They were brought into Natal between 1860 and 1911 to work on sugar plantations and in the railroad industry of the British.

When Gandhi came to South Africa, he initially held to the same attitude toward indentured Indians and black Africans as his high caste Hindu compatriots; he held them in disregard and contempt. I believe Gandhi's conversion to nonviolence, love, and egalitarianism was gradual.

⁸ I would recommend a biography by a close friend of Gandhi: Charles F. Andrews, *Mahatma Gandhi: His Life and Ideas* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths, 2003). Andrews was professor at St. Stephen's College, University of Delhi. Andrews also went to South Africa to encourage Gandhi to come to India. He helped launch Gandhi's nonviolent movement from the college campus in 1915.

His wholehearted conversion to these values took place only toward the end of his stay in South Africa.

Gandhi ascribes this radical change in his attitude to two thinkers: Russian writer Leo Tolstoy and English writer and social reformer John Ruskin. He writes, “Three moderns have left a deep impression on my life and captivated me: Raychandbhai by his living contact; Tolstoy by his book, *The Kingdom of God Is within You*; and Ruskin by his *Unto this Last*.”⁹ Gandhi notes further, “Tolstoy’s *The Kingdom of God Is within You* overwhelmed me. It left an abiding impression on me. Before the independent thinking, profound morality, and the truthfulness of this book, all the books given me by Mr. Coates seemed to pale into insignificance.”¹⁰ Thereafter, Gandhi made a very diligent study of many writings of Tolstoy. He even writes, “I made too an intensive study of Tolstoy’s books. *The Gospels in Brief, What to Do?*, and other books made a deep impression on me. I began to realize more and more the infinite possibilities of universal love.”¹¹ One of the first tasks that Gandhi undertook was to translate Tolstoy’s *The Kingdom of God Is within You* into Gujarati: *Vaikunth Tara Hridayma Chhe*.¹²

The Gandhi-Tolstoy Correspondence

Gandhi moved to South Africa in 1893 at twenty-four years of age. At that time, he was loyal to the British Empire and espoused the negative attitudes the British had toward Black South Africans. He appealed to the Indians of South Africa to join the British in the Second Boer War (1899–1902) and the Zulu War (1906).

However, during this time, and especially after the South Africa wars, Gandhi read Tolstoy. Like Gandhi, Tolstoy came from an aristocratic family. Yet his writings were designed to rattle the power-hungry tsars of

⁹ See Mohandas K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, trans. Mahadev H. Desai (Ahmedabad, India: Navjivan, 1927), 83. See further Leo Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God Is Within You; or, Christianity Not as a Mystical Teaching but as a New Concept of Life* (New York: Noonday, 1961). Note also John Ruskin, *Unto This Last and Other Writings*, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 1986).

¹⁰ Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, 127.

¹¹ Gandhi, 147–48. What Gandhi lists as *What to Do?* is generally called, *What Is to Be Done?* in English.

¹² See Leo Tolstoy, *Vaikunth Tara Hridayma Chhe*, trans. M. K. Gandhi (Ahmedabad, India: Navjivan Trust, 2017). Gujarati is the language of India, spoken in the state of Gujarat. A very high percentage of immigrants to the West come from this state. These are high caste Hindus.

Russia and their cruel generals.¹³ This was especially true after his transformational encounter with Jesus Christ in the 1870s. Gandhi sought to get in touch with Tolstoy and wrote to him in 1909. This began a correspondence between the two that continued until Tolstoy's death in November 1910. Gandhi was forty years old. Tolstoy was eighty-one

Here is Gandhi's synopsis of the letters, which he writes in the introduction to the publication of this correspondence:

To me, as a humble follower of that great teacher (Tolstoy) whom I have long looked upon as one ... Tolstoy's life has been devoted to replacing the method of violence for removing tyranny or securing reform by the method of non-resistance to evil. He would meet hatred expressed in violence by love expressed in self-suffering. He admits of no exception to whittle down this great and divine law of love. He applies it to all the problems that trouble mankind. ... When a man like Tolstoy, one of the clearest thinkers in the western world, one of the greatest writers, one who as a soldier has known what violence is and what it can do, condemns Japan for having blindly followed the law of modern science, falsely so-called, and fears for that country "the greatest calamities," it is for us to pause and consider whether, in our impatience of English rule, we do not want to replace one evil by another and a worse. ... If we do not want the English in India, we must pay the price. Tolstoy indicates it. "Do not resist evil, but also do not yourselves participate in evil—in the violent deeds of the administration of the law courts, the collection of taxes and, what is more important, of the soldiers, and no one in the world will enslave you," passionately declares the sage of Yasnaya Polyana.¹⁴

Tolstoy wrote his initial letter to Gandhi in response to the latter's letter and two issues of a Gandhi publication called *Free India*. He begins his letter to Gandhi, later published as *A Letter to a Hindu*, with a quote from 1 John 4:16: "God is love, and he that abideth in love, abideth in

¹³ Some of Tolstoy's main works are: *War and Peace*, trans. George Gibian (New York: Norton, 1966), *My Confession, My Religion, the Gospel in Brief*, trans. Vera Traill (New York: Scribner, 1925), *Resurrection*, (New York: Pantheon, 1968).

¹⁴ B. Srinivasa Murthy, ed., *Mahatma Gandhi and Leo Tolstoy Letters* (Long Beach, CA: Long Beach, 1987), 41–42.

God, and God in him.”¹⁵ It may be noted that this verse became one of Gandhi’s favorite verses from the Bible. It shaped the words of Gandhi’s favorite hymn, which was often sung at Gandhi prayer meetings and is played to this day during the celebrations of India’s Republic Day.

Tolstoy shows a great degree of knowledge of the oppression of the low and outcaste people groups in India, as well as the power of the colonial lords in South Africa. He urges Gandhi to address these. In his letter, Tolstoy mourns “the astonishing fact that a majority of working people submit to a handful of idlers who control their labour and their very lives is always and everywhere the same—whether the oppressors and oppressed are of one race or whether, as in India and elsewhere, the oppressors are of a different nation.”¹⁶

Based on his earlier works of religion, Tolstoy gives Gandhi the basis of his thoughts on nonviolence. He writes, “in every individual a spiritual element is manifested that gives life to all that exists, and that this spiritual element strives to unite with everything of a like nature to itself, and attains this aim through love. The mere fact that this thought has sprung up among different nations and at different times indicates that it is inherent in human nature and contains the truth.”¹⁷

The basis of this violence, Tolstoy suggests to Gandhi, is the insecurity of the powerful. He writes, “those in power, feeling that the recognition of this truth would undermine their position, consciously or sometimes unconsciously perverted it by explanations and additions quite foreign to it, and also opposed it by open violence.”¹⁸

Tolstoy also stresses that the only way to counter violence is to follow the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. He stresses the following biblical texts, for instance: “But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also” (Matt. 5:39 KJV), and “See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people” (1 Thess. 5:15 NASB, see also Rom. 12:17 and 1 Pet. 3:9 for similar Pauline language). He writes further, “The punishment of evil doers

¹⁵ Leo Tolstoy, *A Letter to a Hindu, with Introduction by Mahatma Gandhi* (London: Renard Press Ltd., 2022). The full correspondence is part of the archives of the government of India, Delhi. See “Mahatma Gandhi and Leo Tolstoy Correspondence,” in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vols. 9 and 10 (Delhi: Publication Division, Government of India, 1965).

¹⁶ Tolstoy, *A Letter*, 45.

¹⁷ Tolstoy, 47.

¹⁸ Tolstoy, 47.

consists in making them feel ashamed of themselves by doing them a great kindness.”¹⁹

Tolstoy addresses the question, why were these teachings of Jesus not practiced in the Western Church? He puts the blame on western individualism. Western individualistic interpretations of Jesus ethical teaching, Tolstoy claims, keeps the Church from applying his teachings to social contexts. He writes, “The recognition that love represents the highest morality was nowhere denied or contradicted, but this truth was so interwoven everywhere with all kinds of falsehoods which distorted it, that finally nothing of it remained but words. It was taught that this highest morality was only applicable to private life—for home use, as it were—but that in public life all forms of violence—such as imprisonment, executions, and wars—might be used for the protection of the majority against a minority of evildoers, though such means were diametrically opposed to any vestige of love”²⁰

Tolstoy further claims that the basis of these acts of violence was the claims of the “divine rights” of a powerful minority, the rulers. This has always been the case in various civilizations. The rulers were understood as the divine ones, who would then assume that it was their right to do violence against the majority of the people. This was true for the ancient pharaohs, as it was true among the rajahs of India, and the tsars of Russia. Thus, Tolstoy urges Gandhi to address the problem of “divine rights,” which was an essential part of the high caste Hinduism, to which Gandhi belonged and which he espoused.

Tolstoy then goes on to urge Gandhi not to be fascinated by Western education and the sciences. These, he suggests, represent the newer basis of oppression. The new religion, he posits, is science. The keepers of scientific knowledge are the new “gods.” They rule by the new religion of the survival of the fittest. According to this new religion, those people who have scientific knowledge have the authority to rule over those who do not have this scientific knowledge. He writes, “The unfortunate majority of men bound to toil is so dazzled by the pomp with which these ‘scientific truths’ are presented, that under this new influence it accepts these scientific stupidities for holy truth, just as it formerly accepted the pseudo-religious

¹⁹ Tolstoy, 48.

²⁰ For this quote, see the online version of Gandhi’s “A Letter to a Hindu,” <https://sites.google.com/a/freedomclassroom.com/freedom-classroom/learn-live-for-freedom/learn-nonviolent-noncooperation-1/-a-letter-to-a-hindu-by-leo-tolstoy-with-intro-by-gandhi>. Accessed June 3, 2022.

justifications; and it continues to submit to the present holders of power who are just as hard-hearted but rather more numerous than before.”²¹

Furthermore, Tolstoy urges Gandhi to employ Jesus’s antidote. He urges Gandhi to develop the principle of “love.” As he puts it, “Love is the only way to rescue humanity from all ills, and in it you too have the only method of saving your people from enslavement.”²²

In this way, Tolstoy urges Gandhi to forsake all forms of violence. Tolstoy had read the young Gandhi’s writings, which he had written while in South Africa. He firmly warns Gandhi, “You say that the English have enslaved your people and hold them in subjection because the latter have not resisted resolutely enough and have not met force by force. But the case is just the opposite. If the English have enslaved the people of India, it is just because the latter recognized, and still recognize, force as the fundamental principle of the social order. If the people of India are enslaved by violence it is only because they themselves live and have lived by violence, and do not recognize the eternal law of love inherent in humanity.”²³ This is indeed a very strong indictment of Gandhi. The great thing about Gandhi is that he learned his lessons from his teacher and guru, Tolstoy, and he learned them well.

Tolstoy highlighted this truth in a different way, when he wrote, “As soon as men live entirely in accord with the law of love natural to their hearts and now revealed to them, which excludes all resistance by violence, and therefore hold aloof from all participation in violence—as soon as this happens, not only will hundreds be unable to enslave millions, but not even millions will be able to enslave a single individual. Do not resist the evildoer and take no part in doing so, either in the violent deeds of the administration, in the law courts, the collection of taxes, or above all in soldiering, and no one in the world will be able to enslave you.”²⁴

Tolstoy posits that colonial modernity has complex tools to foster enslavement of the colonized. This includes the domains of the scientific revolution and education. Countering colonialism with these tools will only lead to more violence. Instead, he constantly gets back to the basic teaching of Jesus and the law of love.

This teaching was a turning point in Gandhi’s thoughts. In his last words to Gandhi, Tolstoy made his thoughts based on nonviolence clearer. In his letter dated September 7, 1910, Tolstoy states the following on love:

²¹ Tolstoy, *A Letter*, 53.

²² Tolstoy, 54.

²³ Tolstoy, 55.

²⁴ Tolstoy, 56.

Most clearly, I think, was it announced by Christ, who said explicitly that on it hang all the Law and the Prophets. More than that, foreseeing the distortion that has hindered its recognition and may always hinder it, he specially indicated the danger of a misrepresentation that presents itself to men living by worldly interests—namely, that they may claim a right to defend their interests by force or, as he expressed it, to repay blow by blow and recover stolen property by force, etc., etc. He knew, as all reasonable men must do, that any employment of the law of love is, and can be, no longer valid if defense by force is set up beside it. And if once the law of love is not valid, then there remains no law except the right of might. The difference between the Christian and all other nations is only this: that in Christianity the law of love had been more clearly and definitely given than in any other religion, and that its adherents solemnly recognized it.²⁵

Tolstoy's Principles of the Sermon on the Mount

Tolstoy surmised that the most important goal, according to the teachings of Jesus, is the kingdom of God. He writes that this kingdom of God is “when all men will cease to learn to make war, when all shall be taught of God and united in love, and the lion will lie down with the lamb. Instead of the threats of punishment which all the old laws of religions and governments alike laid down for nonfulfillment of their rules, instead of promises of rewards for fulfillment of them, this doctrine called men to it only because it was the truth.”²⁶

Tolstoy contended that the core ethical code of Christ's kingdom of God is found in “five simple, clear commandments.” In the following, I summarize the commandments Tolstoy derived from the Sermon on the Mount:

1. Do not make any distinctions between human beings.
2. Love your enemies, as brothers and sisters. Hatred leads to violence. Love leads to peace.

²⁵ Mohandas Gandhi, *Letters from One: Correspondence (and More) of Leo Tolstoy and Mohandas Gandhi; including “Letter to a Hindu,”* River Drafting Spirit Series Book 3 (River Drafting: Kindle Edition, 2011), locations 358–73.

²⁶ Leo Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, trans. Constance Garnett (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2006), 45.

3. Do not resist evil with violence. Violence leads to more violence. Nonresistance of evil leads to peace.
4. Do not commit adultery. Marriage should not be considered as mere cohabitation for enjoyment, but rather as oneness. This idea of marriage and human sexuality obliterates abuse of women. This leads to gender peace in society.
5. Do not swear allegiance to any human or spiritual power. Swearing is a form of spiritual, political, economic slavery. It leads to violence, based on one's allegiance to the state. Power always leads to the quest for increasingly more power and violence against the powerless.

Gandhi became completely enraptured by the five principles of Christ's kingdom of God and the two central ideas of nonviolence and peace. He first used these principles and core themes in his struggle against the unjust rule of the Afrikaans government in South Africa. He created communities in South Africa that practiced these principles. When Gandhi went back to India, after spending twenty-one years in South Africa, he built on these ideas of nonviolent struggle against the violent British rule in India, and toward peace between Hindus, Muslims, and the Sikh communities.

In this way, Tolstoy's *Kingdom of God* had a radical impact on Gandhi's life. I must mention that these teachings went against the high caste Hinduism in which he was reared. The five principles of nonviolence and peace shaped Gandhi's ethics and his movements. These principles, which Gandhi espoused and practiced, were radically different from Hinduism in the following ways:

1. Ethics of humanity: All human beings are equal and created in the image of God. This principle was the radical opposite of the Aryan Hindu caste system.
2. Ethics of nonviolence: It is fitting to note that Gandhi was violently killed by a Hindu nationalist, Nathuram Godse, who espoused the doctrine of high caste Hindu purity.
3. Ethics of love: This ethic went against the right-wing fundamentalist Hindu ideology of hatred of minority Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs.
4. Ethics of sexual purity: This principle went against the

sexual violence endured by low caste and outcaste girls and boys at the hands of high caste landlords and slave owners.

5. Ethics of speaking for the low-caste vulnerable and powerless: Power structures and religion in high caste Hinduism are designed to enslave the vulnerable low caste and outcaste people groups. Gandhi spoke out against swearing allegiance to high caste Vaishnavism and Hindu nationalism.

Nonviolence, Peace, and Truth

From Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God Is within You*, Gandhi learned three central ideas, which he sought to inculcate among his followers. These are nonviolence, peace, and truth.

Nonviolence and peace. In his preface to *The Kingdom of God Is within You*, Tolstoy bemoans the neglect of this central doctrine in modern Christianity as he experienced it in Russia. He writes, "The failure to acknowledge the commandment of nonresistance to evil, which more obviously than any other shows the distortion of Christ's teaching in the church doctrine."²⁷

Tolstoy's (and then Gandhi's) core "nonviolence" text was, "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist evil" (Matt. 5:38–39). In this section of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:38–42 NIV), Jesus goes on to give a few examples.

1. "If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also."
2. "And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well."
3. "If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles."
4. "Give to the one who asks you."
5. "Do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."

²⁷ Tolstoy, xiii.

Both Tolstoy and Gandhi came to understand Jesus's teaching to mean that violence is not an option in any circumstance at all. Tolstoy suggests that Jesus's teaching is seen clearly in his admonition of Peter, who tried to defend him with his sword when the temple guard came to arrest him. Jesus said to Peter, "Those who use the sword die by the sword" (Matt. 26:52).

Violence only leads to more violence. There is no good killing. Killing only leads to more and worse killing.

For the same reason, Tolstoy is of the opinion that Christ's teaching would be against capital punishment.²⁸ Tolstoy opines that first, one can never be certain regarding the ultimate guilt of a killer. And second, killing the killer does not leave room for the possibility of repentance and a change of mind and heart, which is the ultimate goal of Christ's teaching.

Gandhi was very taken with Tolstoy's literal interpretation of Christ's teaching. He came to the opinion that the teachings of Christ must be taken seriously and literally rather than explained away as a metaphor. "Turning the right cheek" to the aggressor, for example, became a literal action for Tolstoy, and then Gandhi. It was not merely a metaphor, although it could have large and varied applications. But it is first and foremost turning the other cheek in a very literal sense, even taking a double thrashing at the hands of the violent aggressor, that causes the violence to dissipate. A violent reaction to violence only leads to more and dangerous degrees of violence.

Violence spreads rapidly and leads to widespread carnage and death, whereas turning the other cheek puts an end to the violence.

Tolstoy, as did Gandhi later, resisted the prevailing idea in the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches of considering Christ's teachings in the Sermon on the Mount as hyperbole. It was popular among churchmen and theologians to regard Christ's teachings as an ideal, but not practical.

Tolstoy notes the dominant notion in the Church in Russia and the Church in the west is that Christ's teaching as found in the Sermon on the Mount is not really Christian. He asserts that both his Russian critics and western critics regard, "the doctrine of the Sermon on the Mount is only a series of very charming, impracticable reveries 'du charmant docteur,' as Renan used to say, which were good enough for the naïve and half-wild

²⁸ Walter Kerr, *The Shabunin Affair: An Episode in the Life of Leo Tolstoy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), is helpful in explaining Tolstoy's turning point toward his views on capital punishment, and his turning to nonviolence and Christ.

inhabitants of Galilee, who lived eighteen hundred years ago, and for the Russian peasants, Syutáev and Bondarév, and the Russian mystic, Tolstoy, but can in no way be applied to the high degree of European culture.”²⁹

In response to the silencing of the ethical teachings of Christ both by the secular world (which regarded the teachings of Christ to be rather ancient and irrelevant to modern, advanced culture), and by the Church (which tended to only accentuate the doctrinal aspects of the person of Christ), Tolstoy sought to emphasize the ethical ramifications of the person and work of Christ. In this light, he asserts:

Eighteen hundred years ago there appeared in the pagan Roman world a strange, new teaching, which resembled nothing which preceded it, and which was ascribed to the man Christ. This new teaching was absolutely new, both in form and in content, for the European world, in the midst of which it arose, and especially in the Roman world, where it was preached and became diffused. . . . In the place of all the rules of former faiths, this teaching advanced only the model of an inner perfection of truth and of love in the person of Christ, and the consequences of this inner perfection, attainable by men—the external perfection, as predicted by the prophets—the kingdom of God, in which all men will stop warring, and all will be taught by God and united in love, and the lion will lie with the lamb. In place of the threats of punishments for the noncompliance with the rules, which were made by the former laws, both religious and political, in place of the enticement of rewards for fulfilling them, this teaching called men to itself only by its being the truth.³⁰

Gandhi learned from Tolstoy that Christ’s teachings in the Sermon on the Mount were tremendously practical and ought not to be regarded as hyperbole or as unattainable ideals. This was especially true regarding the teaching on “nonresistance to evil.” He also learned from Tolstoy that one cannot pick and choose which of Christ’s teachings one can or cannot follow. They both stress that following Christ means changing one’s mind and way of life, which can be a hard thing for human beings to think and do, including Christ’s teachings regarding nonviolence and

²⁹ Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God*, 40.

³⁰ Tolstoy, 45.

peace through nonviolence.

Truth. Another principle which Gandhi espoused from Tolstoy was the idea of “truth.” In Gandhian thought, “truth” is the most crucial virtue. He called his movement *Satyagraha*, which means a constant quest and clinging to the truth. He called his autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*.³¹

Early in his book, Tolstoy quotes Jesus’s words, “You shall know the Truth, and the Truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). This verse is quoted often throughout the book. Tolstoy stresses that the religious and political authorities sought to kill Christ because he stood up for the truth. He writes, “No proofs of this doctrine were offered except its truth, the correspondence of the doctrine with the truth. There is only the image of truth to guide him, for inward perfection in the person of Christ, and for outward perfection in the establishment of the kingdom of God.”³² Tolstoy stressed that this ought to be the mission of every human being—to bring about the kingdom of God, through truth-keeping.

In fact, Tolstoy concludes *The Kingdom of God* with the words of Jesus that influenced Gandhi the most: “‘But seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you’ (Matt 6:33). The sole meaning of life is to serve humanity by contributing to the establishment of the kingdom of God, which can only be done by the recognition and profession of the truth by every man. ‘The kingdom of God cometh not with outward show; neither shall they say, Lo here! or, Lo there! for behold, the kingdom of God is within you’ (Luke 7:20–21).”³³

It is worth noting that Gandhi’s translation of Tolstoy’s work into Gujarati, *Vaikunth Tara Hridayma Chhe*, had consequences Gandhi may not have foreseen. This translation says a lot about Gandhi’s understanding of Tolstoy and Christ. Gandhi had read Tolstoy; he knew what Tolstoy was talking about. Yet, Gandhi translated both Tolstoy and Jesus into Hindu thought, the result of which influenced how later Hindu followers of Gandhi interpreted his thoughts. It seems to me that their thoughts on what is the kingdom of God became further removed from Tolstoy and, ultimately, from Jesus Christ.

In fact, the title of the Gujarati translation of the *Kingdom of God Is within You*, *Vaikunth Tara Hridayma Chhe* means the “the kingdom of Vishnu is in your (singular) heart.” *Vaikunth* is the domain of high caste

³¹ See Gandhi, *An Autobiography*.

³² Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God*, 45.

³³ Tolstoy, 325.

Hindus. It is also called *Vishnuloka*, i.e., the domain of the high caste deity called Vishnu, and his consort Lakshmi. It is a place where only high caste Hindu men would go. Perhaps this was not Gandhi's intent, but sadly, high caste Hinduism in the post-Gandhi years would not allow the kingdom of God to be a domain for low-caste Shudras and the Atishudras.

My sense is that Gandhi's thought was not successfully imported into India because Gandhi was not able to carry out the deep level of change that he envisaged in Hindu India. The title of the book suggests that this was the main thesis of Tolstoy's book, *The Kingdom of God Is within You*. There are, hence, a series of questions we should be asking: What did Jesus mean when he said, "the kingdom of God is within you"? What did Tolstoy mean? What did Gandhi mean?

More important, what did the later followers of Gandhi mean?

The problem is that today the Hindu followers of Gandhi take it to mean *Vaiakunta*, or *Vishnu Rajya*, the kingdom of the *high caste* god Vishnu. This means that there is no place for the low caste and the out-caste unless they are subject to the high caste. This means there is no place for minorities like Muslims and Christians in the kingdom of Vishnu.

Tolstoy to Gandhi on the Need for New Birth

Scholars of Tolstoy remind us that in his final years, Tolstoy became a devoted follower of Jesus and fostered the idea of rebirth as taught by Jesus in the Gospel of John.³⁴ He opined that true love can only come about when one follows Jesus's words, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again" (John 3:3). This was central to his book *The Kingdom of God Is within You*.

Thus convinced, Tolstoy wrote to Gandhi about the need for a "new birth"—both individual and social rebirth. Gandhi, in his response, did not see the need of a rebirth experience, and Tolstoy left it at that. Gandhi wrote, "As regards 'rebirth,' I for my part should not omit anything, for I think that faith in a rebirth will never restrain mankind as much as faith in the immortality of the soul and in divine truth and love. But I leave it to you to omit it if you wish to. I shall be very glad to assist your edition."³⁵

Why did Gandhi respond like this? Many people have suggested various answers. Some have suggested that to answer otherwise would have damaged Gandhi's developing relationship with the Hindu leaders of

³⁴ See Hugh McLean, "Tolstoy and the Religious Culture of His Time: A Biography of a Long Conversion, 1845–1887," *Slavic Review* (2009): 713–14.

³⁵ Murthy, *Mahatma Gandhi and Leo Tolstoy Letters*, 28.

the Indian National Congress Party. Others have suggested that Gandhi was deeply hurt by the church in South Africa, and so did not want to be associated with the church. To the latter, I may point out that Tolstoy himself was against the organized church. He viewed the modern church as being far removed from the teachings of Christ.

Why, then, did Gandhi reject Tolstoy and Jesus's teaching of individual and social rebirth? In my opinion, Gandhi missed the most central point of Tolstoy's nonviolent teaching of Jesus: there can be no real lasting change unless it is accompanied by a social and deeply personal rebirth experience. It is only through such rebirth that the three central themes of nonviolent love, peace, and truth can truly be lived out in individuals and society.

Sometimes I wonder if the religiously based violence in India that Gandhi saw during his last days in India gave him pause to reflect on this crucial basis of Tolstoy's thought. Sadly, seventy years after Gandhi's death, India still struggles with the five issues Tolstoy and Ruskin underlined, and they are not alone. One hundred years after the correspondence between Tolstoy and Gandhi, we are seeing the death of thousands of vulnerable Ukrainians at the hands of a violent Russian army, and the flight of millions of women and children.

In this light, I wish that the three central ideas of nonviolent love, truth, and peace would be revisited in our global society today, especially based on the realities in India, Ukraine, and the USA. In the following, I summarize some key issues related to each nation:

1. Ethic of Humanity
 - a. India is still plagued with the caste system. Low castes and outcastes still face many injustices.
 - b. Russia is plagued with deep notions of the inhumanity of low-caste and outcaste Ukrainians.
 - c. The USA is plagued with racial and ethnic hatred. My students care about the Black Lives Matter and AAPI Lives Matter (Asian Americans and Pacific Islander) movements. I think the church has much to learn from Tolstoy and Gandhi. I would urge the Church in the West to develop an ethic of humanity, based on the thoughts of Tolstoy and Gandhi.
2. Ethic of Nonviolent Love
 - a. Violence against the low castes and religious minorities is still a major issue in India.

- b. The world is witnessing horrible acts of violence in Ukraine. Yet, Russian Christian leaders—Orthodox as well as even some Russian Evangelical leaders—are strangely quiet about it. I pray that my Russian sisters and brothers would hear the voice of Jesus spoken through the words of Tolstoy and Gandhi, and aggressively act with “nonviolent love” responses to Russian president Vladimir Putin’s violence.
 - c. The US president Joe Biden recently signed the Emmett Till Antilynching Act. This, I think, is a good thing. Violence against minorities is growing rapidly all over the West. I pray that the church in the USA would come up with concrete strategies of “nonviolent love” to protect our minoritized sisters and brothers from acts of violence.
3. Ethic of Love toward Enemies
- a. In India, enmity against the low castes and outcastes is at an all-time high. This enmity is significantly codified in laws against low castes, outcastes, and minorities. Reading these laws and observing this enmity, we are reminded that Gandhi did not genuinely lead Indians to Jesus. We must remember that Christ alone is the true source of the ethic of love.
 - b. Nationalism and racial purity notions are at an all-time high in Russia and Europe. I have heard Russian Christian friends describe Ukrainians in very derogatory terms. No wonder some Russian Christians do not seem to be in an uproar over the wiping out of Ukrainians. I think Russian Christians need to come up with a strong ethic of love toward their Ukrainian sisters and brothers.
 - c. The 2020 elections in the US demonstrated a dearth of an ethic of love. At larger cultural levels, there some times seems to be no healing in sight. I wish the American church would heed the words of Tolstoy and Gandhi, and develop strong strategies based on an ethic of love toward the “enemy.”
4. Ethic of Sexuality
- a. In India, a low-caste or outcaste girl or woman is raped every twenty minutes. The COVID-19 pandemic has

caused many, many more girls to be taken into sexual slavery. The Indian government is doing nothing to protect weak and vulnerable girls and boys. I wish politicians and social/religious leaders would listen to the voice of Gandhi.

- b. Women and girls are abused as a weapon of war by Russian soldiers. News reports, especially from areas that were occupied by Russian soldiers, like Bucha, Ukraine, bear this out. I wish Russian soldiers would read some Tolstoy!
 - c. Human trafficking of women and girls is at an all-time high in the US, especially during the pandemic lockdown. Predators have taken advantage of the lockdown for the online sexual exploitation of children.³⁶ The American evangelical church must come up with strong strategies to respond to this pandemic's ethics of sexuality.
5. Ethic of Allegiance to Christ and the Core Principles of Christ
- a. In India, nationalistic Hindutva (high caste Hindu rule) is governing politics. The highest caste does great injustice against the low castes and the outcastes, based on their allegiance to high caste Hinduism. It should be noted that Gandhi's assassin, Nathuram Godse, was a member of a right-wing Hindu party. I wish members of the Indian government would read Gandhi!
 - b. In Russia, many Russians pledge complete allegiance to Putin and his nationalistic policies. This includes evangelical Russian Christians. I wish Russian Christians would listen to Tolstoy! I think he would say, "Don't owe allegiance to anyone except Christ and his ethics."
 - c. An overwrought nationalism is at an all-time high in the US. It seems that all politicians must prove they are nationalistic in one way or another to be elected, even outdoing each other to show who is more nationalistic. I sometimes wonder if the American evangelical church is not far behind. I encourage the American evangelical

³⁶ See for example Lara Jakes, "Pandemic Lockdowns Aided Predators Worldwide, Especially Online, U.S. Says," *New York Times*, Nov. 10, 2021.

church to listen to the voice of Tolstoy and affirm, “We owe our primary allegiance to no one else but to Christ alone and to his core principles.”

Conclusion

I recently published a book entitled *The Marys of the Bible: The Original #MeToo Movement*.³⁷ In this book, I seek to address a much-needed global phenomenon called the #MeToo movement. In India alone, a girl or woman is raped every twenty minutes. In the book, I narrate a horrific incident on December 12, 2012, in which a twenty-three-year-old medical student was brutally raped by six men on a public transportation bus. Because she was low caste and her boyfriend was high caste, their relationship was unacceptable. They could never get married. After brutally raping her, the men threw her out of the bus where she was found by a passerby. Eleven days after the horrible rape, she was flown to Singapore for a last-ditch effort to save her life. She died in surgery to repair her gruesome injuries.

In January 2013, I traveled to India to teach a PhD seminar made up primarily of women students. Women’s groups and students across India took to the streets to ask for justice for Indian girls and women. The young medical student, Nirbhaya, was India’s daughter.³⁸ The Prime Minister of India at that time, Mr. Manmohan Singh, said in a speech to the Parliament that there needs to be a fundamental change in the very moral fiber of India.³⁹

It seems to me that Manmohan Singh, a fervent disciple of Gandhi, was asking, What has happened to the India of Gandhi? Where are the Gandhis of India today? I would ask the same question to Russians: Where are the Tolstoys of Russia today?

In the Hebrew Bible, there is a poignant narrative about the prophets Elijah and Elisha. When Elijah was taken up by a whirlwind into heaven, the cloak of Elijah fell into his hands. He was beside himself with sorrow and perplexity. He exclaimed, “Where is the God of Elijah?” (2 Kings

³⁷ Boaz Johnson, *The Marys of the Bible: The Original #MeToo Movement*, with forewords by Bindulata Barik, Ingrid Faro, and Elizabeth Pierre (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018).

³⁸ The phrase “India’s Daughter” is based on a 2015 BBC documentary production based on the 2012 gang rape and murder of twenty-three-year-old medical student, Nirbhaya. Sadly, this film was banned in India.

³⁹ Johnson, *The Marys of the Bible*, 93.

2:14). Thankfully, Elisha got his answer soon thereafter. He simply took the cloak of Elijah and struck the waters of the Jordan, and the water was parted, as with the prophets of old, Moses, Joshua, and Elijah.

In the end, the question is not: Where is the God of Moses, Joshua, and Elijah? Today, the question for the Evangelical Covenant Church, and the Church in the West more broadly, is Where are the Moseses, Joshuas, and Elijahs of God?