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Tolstoy's last station

by John Dear

On the Road to Peace

The best part about the recent movie "The Last Station" -- a film that covers Leo Tolstoy's turbulent last year -- is Christopher Plummer's performance. With subtlety and skill he brings Tolstoy to life as the last days take their toll. Family bliss wasn't in his destiny. His wife, Sophia, failed to appreciate his Gospel values and wrangled with him over his plans to relinquish the copyrights of his works to the public domain.



She thought he was crazy; she obsessed over her children's

inheritance. And in the end, all the family renounced him but one daughter. But Tolstoy pressed on; he lived by another light. He had undergone a radical conversion, and it inspired him to reject property, wealth and warfare. It pitted him against his own Russian Orthodox Church, an eager issuer of blessings upon the armies of the Czar.

At wit's end finally, on October 28, 1910, Tolstoy gathered a few belongings and, in the middle of the night, left his country estate, Yasnaya Polyana. He boarded a train headed south and along the way contracted pneumonia. And at the remote station in Astapovo, he succumbed and died. This November 20 will mark the anniversary -- it will be a hundred years.

I've been studying Tolstoy for decades. I love his novels, especially *Resurrection*, a tale that resolves at the end with the complete Sermon on the Mount -- a literary flourish for which the Orthodox Church excommunicated him. (I've yet to read *War and Peace*. I'm putting that on reserve for my next stint in prison. Something to look forward to.)

Tolstoy came to believe that Christianity required pacifism and active nonviolence -- something, unfortunately, the film touches on only lightly. He used the term "non-resistance," based on the Sermon on the Mount commandment: "Do not offer violent resistance to one who does evil" (Matthew 5:39).

A rare specimen, Tolstoy. He held the strange idea that Jesus meant what he said. And so he taught: "Do not resist evil with evil." And: "Respect the personal integrity of each person." "Assume direct personal responsibility for the moral world which surrounds you. Never delegate your moral responsibility." "Seek out all opportunities for direct, creative ethical action." "Avoid violence, anger, the invasion of others, refuse bloodshed, and all kinds of theft and lies, covert or open -- especially in their approved and institutionalized forms."

He wrote: "Christianity, which demands from its followers meekness, humility, kindness, forgiveness of sins and love of enemies, is incompatible with violence, which forms an indispensable condition of power."

And: "War is so unjust and ugly that all who wage it must try to stifle the voice of conscience within themselves."

Tolstoy, a veteran of wars himself, knew the reality of war, and how the church got caught up in the culture of war. He wanted everyone to wake up, take Jesus at his word, and set off on a new life of nonviolence, love, and peace.

"If peace has not been established, it is not because there does not exist among all people the universal desire for it," he wrote. "It is not because there is no love for peace and the abhorrence of war, but only because there exists the cunning deceit by which people have been and are persuaded that peace is impossible and war indispensable."

At the turn of the century, Mahatma Gandhi read Tolstoy's works. And his favorite, he said, was *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, written in 1893. It convinced Gandhi that, in the welter of human travail, God bestowed only one moral, spiritual, and practical path -- the path of nonviolence.

He wrote to Tolstoy and a correspondence began. And Tolstoy immediately recognized the greatness of this unknown Hindu, stirring up trouble in South Africa. For Gandhi's part, after Tolstoy's death, he named his ashram after Tolstoy. Tolstoy, he wrote, is "the greatest apostle of nonviolence that the present age has produced."

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The czar in those days imposed compulsory military practice; so Tolstoy taught that Christians must stand against the state. Because the Russian church blessed that nation's wars, Tolstoy taught that Christians must reject the church, too. He taught, rather, "Christian anarchy," a nonviolence that refuses to cooperate with any institutional violence.

"His religion is an expensive one," wrote social critic Kenneth Rexroth in his introduction to my copy of *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*

. "If it were literally put into practice, organized society would collapse and it is open to question if it could ever be rebuilt afterwards. ...

"Fiery apostles of nonviolence ... do not make good colleagues or neighbors. Tolstoy was a crank, with all the weaknesses of a crank, but, as cranks sometimes are, he was far more right than the majority of people who profess to speak for the majority of all the other inarticulate human beings. He was a prophet. Prophets are supposed to be cranks."

Tolstoy's inspiration came from the U.S. abolitionists. William Lloyd Garrison's son wrote to Tolstoy and sent him a copy of his father's ground-breaking 1838 "Declaration of Non-resistance," a manifesto on the abolition of war and the life of nonviolence, based on Matthew 5:39. Tolstoy begins *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* with Garrison's text, including this:

Our country is the world, our country men and women are all humankind. We register our testimony, not only against all wars, whether offensive or defensive, but against all preparations for war; against every naval ship, every arsenal, every fortification; against the military system and standing army; against all military chiefs and soldiers; against all monuments commemorative of victory over a foe, all trophies won in battle, all celebrations in honor of military exploits; against all appropriations for the defense of a nation by force and arms; against every edit of government requiring of its subjects military service. We deem it unlawful to bear arms, or to hold a military office... If the time [comes] when swords shall be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, and men shall not learn the art of war any more, it follows that all who manufacture, sell or wield these deadly weapons do thus array themselves against the peaceful dominion of the Son of God on earth.

Garrison's vision was carried on by his devoted follower, Adin Ballou of Hopedale, Mass. (see: www.adinballou.org), who spent some 50 years teaching the way of nonresistance. More, Ballou's *Catechism of Non-Resistance* ended up, along with Garrison's words, in Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You*.

Tolstoy was amazed at how fast Garrison's and Ballou's teachings had been forgotten. Seeing how the filmmakers skirted Tolstoy's theme of nonviolence, it amazes me how quickly Tolstoy's words have been forgotten.

Indeed, Tolstoy was rejected by his family, his church, and his country -- and within decades, tens of millions of Russians would be dead. His rejection oddly consoles me, as I think on my own modest campaign to press nonviolence. My thirty years of teaching have, as well, been largely rejected. But then I remember that Jesus said, "If they accept me, they'll accept you; if they reject me, they'll reject you."

Rightfully, I worry. As we reject Tolstoy's and Gandhi's teachings of nonviolence and the Sermon on the Mount, we are opening ourselves to unparalleled violence. The only viable future is a path toward nonviolence. And entrusted with the task, know it or not, is the church of the One who uttered, "Love your enemies, for God sends rain on the just and the unjust."

All those who espouse Christian nonviolence today are heirs of Adin Ballou, Leo Tolstoy, Mahatma Gandhi and Dorothy Day. We too have a duty to propagate the message of Gospel nonviolence, whether we're forgotten or not, rejected or not, accepted or not. Our task is to offer the teaching, reclaim the Sermon on the Mount, live the life and point the way to a new world of universal peace.

Thank you, Leo Tolstoy. Your teaching helps us be authentic Christians.

This week, John will lead a retreat, "The Gospel According to John," near Stroudsburg, Pa.; see www.kirkridge.org. To contribute to Catholic Relief Services' "Fr. John Dear Haiti Fund," go to: <http://donate.crs.org/goto/fatherjohn>. He will teach a course, "Gandhi, King, Day and Merton," Aug. 2-6, at Ghost Ranch Center, Abiquiu, N.M., see www.ghost ranch.org. He will lead weekend retreats on "Jesus and the Gospel of Peace" in Massachusetts, May 21-23 (see: www.rowecenter.org) and Los Angeles, June 17-20 (see: www.hsrcenter.com). John's latest book, *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* (Orbis), along with other recent books, *A Persistent Peace* and *Put Down Your Sword*, as well as Patricia Normile's *John Dear On Peace*, are available from www.amazon.com. For further information, or to schedule a lecture, go to www.johndear.org.

Editor's Note: Read Sr. Rose Pacatte's review of the film *The Last Station: December's Embers*.

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