Agony at Jabbok: Freedom and Suffering in the Ethics and Politics of Christian Nonviolence

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ABSTRACT
This paper analyzes two motifs that appear within the tradition of Christian nonviolence, those of power and freedom. Looking, in particular, at the Christian ethics of Leo Tolstoy, I attempt to draw out the implications of the Tolstoyan ethic of rational non-violence *vis-à-vis* alternative conceptions, tropes and images of freedom, love, and divinity. Tolstoy's beliefs were shaped in large part by his conceptions of God and Jesus Christ, and these in turn were influenced by his rationalism and a somewhat limited notion of freedom— the world is a battleground for the war of good and evil, with the choice of good becoming clear once we recognize the moral law of God that is imprinted on our hearts. The central concern: Does a commitment to personal nonviolence necessitate a commitment to absolute pacifism? Perhaps, along with Tolstoy's younger compatriot Nikolai Berdyaev, we can see the "tragedy" of human experience not in the struggle between good and evil, but rather in the conflict, the *agon*/agony between competing values, in this case those of nonviolence and a more generalized impulse towards freedom or liberation.

That night Jacob waited alone. There some man struggled with him, even until daybreak. It was clear that he could not overcome Jacob, so he broke his thigh at the hip. Jacob's thigh was limp as he struggled with him. "Let me go, day is breaking," he said. "I won't let go of you," said the other, "until I have your blessing." Now he asked him: "What is your name?" "Jacob," he said. "Not anymore Jacob, heel-clutcher, will be said in your name; instead Israel, God-clutcher, because you have held on among gods unnamed as well as men, and you have overcome."
– Genesis 32: 26-29 (Rosenberg translation)

It is, for many, a familiar if striking scene: Jacob struggles at Jabbok for the Blessing, with an unnamed divine being, and after a full night of *agon* (lit., struggle, but also agony, for his thigh has been broken), the grandson of Abraham overcomes his mysterious unnamed antagonist. Christian writers (Protestant especially) have often cited this story as an example of the loving *agon* that takes place between humanity and the divine, but, as Harold Bloom points out, this passage, like most biblical fragments, is extraordinarily multivalent, and thus open to various interpretations—ones that shed light, particularly, on the meaning of freedom and suffering in the relationship of humanity to the Jewish and Christian God. Jacob clearly suffers (as does his foe), "there is absolutely nothing loving about this sublime night encounter, which exalts Jacob to Israel ['God-clutcher'] yet leaves him permanently crippled" (Bloom *J* 217). Gaining the Blessing, which is, in its most radically denuded form, nothing more or less than a promise of abundant life for Israel and his children, Jacob and the divine nameless one are mutually scarred: Life comes not only with great struggle, but at great risk, of life and limb.

This paper analyzes two motifs that appear within the tradition of Christian nonviolence, those of power and freedom. Looking, in particular, at the Christian ethics of Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), I attempt to draw out the implications of the Tolstoyan ethic of rational non-violence *vis-à-vis* alternative conceptions, tropes and images of freedom, love, and divinity. Tolstoy's beliefs were shaped in large part by his conceptions of God and Jesus Christ, and these in turn were influenced by his rationalism and a somewhat limited notion of freedom—the world is a battleground for the war of good and evil, with the choice of good becoming clear once we recognize the moral law of God that is imprinted on our hearts. The central concern: Does a commitment to personal nonviolence necessitate a commitment to absolute pacifism? Perhaps, along with Tolstoy's younger compatriot Nikolai Berdyaev (1874-1948), we can see the "tragedy" of human experience not in the struggle between good and evil, but rather in the conflict, the *agon*/agony between competing values, in this case those of nonviolence and a more generalized impulse towards freedom or liberation.

Alternative Ethics: The Power of Risk

All true creativity is a divine-human process—a divine call and a human answer—not in slavish obedience to a dictate or 'blueprint from heaven', but as a divine-human response out of unlimited freedom to a divine-human summons.
– Nikolai Berdyaev

Sharon Welch, in *A Feminist Ethic of Risk,* takes up the challenge of Nikolai Berdyaev by constructing an ethical and theological vision out of the voices of oppression, one that provides a challenge of an ethics of liberation to the non-poor and non-oppressed of the West. Like Berdyaev before her, Welch delimits a theology of "divine immanence"; a richly textured understanding of human empowerment through the transformative-creative love of self, others, and life itself. Welch proclaims the joy that arises, not out of certainty of victory, but out of a love of life even in the most compromising and difficult circumstances. "Love" is not passive acceptance, however: failure to resist when resistance is called for is "the death of the imagination, the death of caring, the death of the ability to love… [and as such] we lose the ability to imagine strategies of resistance and ways of sustaining each other in the long struggle for justice" (20). Welch grounds her study in the strategic risk-taking of black women writers, whose creativity is meaningful action in the understanding that victory is a distant goal. Those of us immersed in mainstream Euro-American thought traditions are so concerned with *telos* and certainty that without a specific utopia—be it a Kingdom of God on earth or a classless state of loving brotherhood—we tend to do

nothing, falling into the "cultured despair" that is apathy and cynicism in one. Yet the 20th century bore witness to the dangers of deterministic utopian revolution, which sets means (and thus, ethics) to one side in the name of a greater goal.

Thus it is of great concern to move somehow between idealism and cynical apathy. For Welch this can only come through a revaluation of our own truths and values in the light of the specific acts of these other voices that constantly challenge us. Responsible action must be re-defined as not the certain achievement of desired ends, but the creation of a ground or matrix in which future actions are possible: "the creation of the conditions of possibility for desired changes"—a creation enabled by participation in an extensive community of agents. Part of the problem recognized by Welch is the dangerous and frequently made conflation of *otherness* with *opposition*—the "denial of difference" seems to be a particular malady of the utopian imagination. (35) If it is imagined that a part of the socio-political good is uniformity, or the absence of tension, then difference per se comes to be suspected: "Difference and disagreement are then viewed as the product of either ignorance or ill-will, unfortunate or dangerous factors to be eliminated." Difference, in short, comes to be equated with chaos (or "anarchy"), which is antithetical to the achievement of the good that is normally conceived in terms of order, stability, and harmony. Against this utopian mode, Welch argues that the chaos of interdependence or mutuality is not only inevitable, but is in fact positive—"as the fertile matrix of human creativity, leading to richer political and intellectual constructions as the insights and needs of various groups are fully taken into account."

Moreover, the traditional (i.e., "modern") valorization of certainty and absoluteness reveals itself in a theology that valorizes absolute power through its concept of an omnipotent (judicial) God, a theology that unsurprisingly often manifests itself politically as a glorification of domination. (Welch 111) Rather than stress human humility, the idea of an omnipotent and fully sovereign God assumes that absolute power can be a good, when according to Welch (as well as Berdyaev and neo-anarchist Murray Bookchin), it can *never be*, precisely because it assumes that the ability to act regardless of the response of others is a good rather than a sign of alienation form others. Augustine's "theology of politics" destroys the notion held by Augustine's contemporary John Chrysostom of the moral freedom to rule oneself—a freedom that is a fundamental part of the gospel message. Welch calls this a victory for the "erotics of domination," in which oppressive power gains much of its force through the claim of submission to a greater (moral/religious/rational) purpose; it is a victory for the spirit of bourgeois power, and can be seen in the Christian tradition, liberal democracy, and authoritarian fascism and communism.

Power: God the Almighty and the Daring of Abram

The claim of moral purpose blinds both oppressor and those who acquiesce to oppression.

– Sharon Welch

If moral purpose in any kind of absolute conception is, *qua* absoluteness, oppression, then we are faced with the curious possibility of God's own blindness. Is this possible? Not, it would seem, if we cling to the conception of God the Almighty Father. Perhaps it comes down to a question of power and freedom. In this light another biblical story is instructive: though Job is often considered the most daring and exemplary figure of revolt against divine injustice, there is in the First Testament a short conversation that unfolds on the way to Sodom, between YHWH and Abram, which seems to be a much more radical questioning of the power and absolute ways of God. YHWH has pledged to destroy the Cities of the Plain for showing contempt for his ways (not, as is often interpreted, for any specific sins such as "sodomy"). Abram daringly intercedes in the name of "justice," in what both Harold Bloom and Martin Buber have seen as "the boldest speech of man in all Scripture… because it is the word of the intercessor who is moved by the purpose of his intercession to lose even the awe of God" (Bloom *J* 301). Abram confronts YHWH, somewhat warily but with evident firmness, hoping to augment life by reminding God just who He is, or is supposed to be ("Can it be—heaven forbid—you, judge of all the earth, will not bring justice?"). Buber goes so far as to invoke YHWH's "Divine Demonism," concluding that "[i]t was proper to withstand Him, since after all He does not require anything else of me than myself" (Bloom *J* 302).

The question of the freedom of God's children has been addressed by theologians, ethicists, and novelists alike, and though there has been of course no resolution to the problem of freedom *vis-à-vis* the Almighty, the insights gained from different approaches to the question can help us envisage alternative images of God, the God-man (Christ), and humans-with-God. One interesting theme which runs throughout much of Western ethical philosophy as well as some strains of rational theology is that ultimately the life of reason is the best life for man—the good life—and that, concomitantly, suffering and pain, if they are acknowledged at all, are (irrational) evils to be eliminated from the human condition. Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy is one Christian writer passionately concerned with freedom and justice for humanity, and it is to his ethics, and the theological and philosophical presuppositions which undergird them, that we shall now turn, in order to shed further light upon the implications of the tradition just described in terms of the political and ethical climate of our own day.

The Count Of Peace

One can live only so long as one is intoxicated, drunk with life; but when one grows sober one cannot fail to see that it is all a stupid cheat. What is truest about it is that there is nothing even funny or silly in it; it is cruel and stupid, purely and simply.

– Leo Tolstoy

Leo Tolstoy was an aristocrat, possessor of 300 souls as serfs, owner of a grand estate (Yasnaya Polyana), and all the privileges and pleasures that accrued to such a position in 19th-century tsarist Russia. Yet he was also a man who came to feel the injustice of his society and the caste of which he was so much a part, dedicating himself in his middle age to preaching a doctrine of pacifism and brotherly-love, and attempting to reformulate Christianity along rational lines of social justice. E.M. de Vogüé says of Tolstoy that he had a "queer combination of the brain of an English chemist with the soul of an Indian Buddhist" (Berlin 3). Indeed, the schizophrenic tendencies of the man are legendary, conflict not only arising between his life and his ideals, but between his rational skepticism and his yearnings for spiritual and moral perfection.

Isaiah Berlin characterizes Tolstoy as both a "fox" *and* a "hedgehog"—by nature one who "pursued many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory… and related to no moral or aesthetic principle," yet one who strove to "relate everything to a single vision, one system… a single, universal, organizing principle in terms of which alone all that (exists, and all that is said and done) has significance."

Tolstoy held a firm belief in natural law, whereby the lives of human beings no less than that of nature are determined: men, he argues, unable to face the fact of determinism, seek to represent their lives as a succession of free choices, and fix responsibility for what occurs upon persons endowed by them with heroic virtues or heroic vices. Human life is fixed to truth: "Truth not only points the way along which human life ought to move, but reveals also the only way along which it can move" (*Kingdom* 355). As such, freedom is confined between "the limits of complete ignorance of the truth and a recognition of a part of the truth," and thus seems hardly freedom at all, but more like the "freedom of [a] horse harnessed with others to a cart, [who] is not free to refrain from moving the cart… [for] if he does not move forward the cart will knock him down and go on dragging him with it, whether he will or not." Like the cart-horse, human beings are free to either move voluntarily or be moved with the cart, and though this is may be a limited freedom (indeed, if it is freedom at all), Tolstoy claims that this is the only freedom we can expect, and more than that, it is "the sole means of accomplishing the divine work of the life of the world."

Yet, for all the falsity of freedom, Tolstoy conceived of himself and was viewed by his many followers and admirers as just the heroic titan-figure he seems to decry, a latter-day Moses set to lead the peasants of Russia out of the oppression of the Tsars and the Church.[1] Despite his Schopenhaurean pessimism (e.g., life is nothing more than "a stupid cheat"), Tolstoy desperately longed for a universal explanatory principle, one common single purpose or unity in the apparent chaos and meaninglessness of the world. Though a fierce critic of liberal utopianism, he had no intentions of breaking with the faith in reason and in the ultimate victory of humanity against all forms of injustice. Isaiah Berlin draws a connection between Tolstoy's "skeptical realism" and the "dogmatic authoritarianism" of French Catholic reactionary Joseph de Maistre (1753-1821). "Both spring," says Berlin, "from an agonized belief in a single, serene vision, in which all problems are resolved, all doubts stilled, peace and understanding finally achieved" (79). Tolstoy placed his vision within the realm of reason, which was, ultimately, *the same as the Kingdom of God,* and not in the realm of traditional "superstition" and the corrupt institutional Church. Tolstoy's freedom was a leap into the arms of the moral law, the truth of the Gospel message as embodied in the Sermon on the Mount, but this moral law is one that is eminently and necessarily reasonable.

Reason and Love in Christianity

The truth is only dangerous to those who commit evil. Those who do good love the truth.
– Leo Tolstoy

As Peter Marshall points out, Tolstoy's politics were inextricably connected with his moral views, which in turn were based on a distinctive and unorthodox version of Christianity. (362) Though a self-described anarchist, Tolstoy was no exponent of a free *eros*; perhaps in reaction to the libidinous hedonism of his early life (which he described as a life of "coarse dissoluteness"), he strove to eliminate lust in any of its forms. If anything, Tolstoy's anarchist morality calls for the *repression*, not the *liberation* of sensuality, which in his eyes is antithetical to reason, spirit, and love. The irrationality of desire burdened the Tolstoyan vision; his new Christianity had no need of such, it was to be "the religion of Christ… purged of beliefs and mysticism, a practical religion not promising future bliss but giving bliss on earth" (Marshall 364)—a bliss that was purely rational and, in a sense, disinterested about persons in the name of love for humanity. Denouncing the authority of not only the tsarist regime but of all states (as "conspirac[ies] designed not only to exploit, but above all to corrupt [the] citizens"), the sole authority to be recognized is that of the moral law of Christ, which is ultimately to found "within us."

After a desperate search to find meaning to his life in mainstream philosophy and religion, Tolstoy eventually was converted to a religion of love based upon a literal interpretation of the Gospels, particularly the Sermon on the Mount. Though never fully consistent, the Tolstoyan ethic, as promulgated in his *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (1894), has had great influence, most obviously upon a certain young Indian barrister living in South Africa at the turn of the century—Mohandes Gandhi. Tolstoy came to believe that Christ is not in any sense the divine Son of God, but rather (and here he unconsciously echoes the words of the Qur'an) a great prophet—or more correctly, a great ethical teacher who put forth the moral law that is God's both great promise and His legacy to the world. Dismissing the concept of the afterlife (while questioning, with a hubristic naiveté typical of Tolstoy, the inevitability of his own death), he claimed that an inner light reveals itself in human reason, which nonetheless comes from an outside source—God—and will endure after death (even though we will not). Reason, *pace* Voltaire and the *philosophes*, leads us not away from God, but towards Him—"for the activity is reason is truth, and God is divine truth" (Marshall 369). Love and reason are one and the same; reason should be loving just as love should be reasonable. This is, in a sense, the center of Tolstoy's thought, and informs his ethical formulations and his picture of suffering.

Nonviolence and Suffering

All you suffering men of the Christian world, both rulers and rich and poor and oppressed, need only free yourselves from the deceptions of false Christianity and government (concealing what Christ revealed to you and what is demanded by your reason and your heart) and it will become clear to you that it is in yourselves and only in yourselves that you will find the cause of all the bodily suffering… and spiritual suffering… that torments you.
– Leo Tolstoy

Tolstoy formulated a new "Pentalogue" of commandments, gleaned from his reading of the Gospels. The first is "Do not be angry, but live at peace with all men"; the fourth, "Do not resist evil." These—with the help of Henry David Thoreau's essay on "Civil Disobedience"—led directly to the development of the doctrine of nonviolent resistance, which is essentially the refusal, *in all circumstances,* to resist evil by force. It is only via "persuasion," argues Tolstoy, that true change can

occur; nonviolent resistance is designed to influence public opinion on which evil structures and institutions rest. For Tolstoy the Law of God is *always superior* to the Law of man, and the Law of God is rational love, brotherly love for all humanity. The best life is lived close to nature, yet as we have noted the senses are to be restrained, and, above all, what is to be sought is a life of voluntary work, family, friendships, and, significantly, one which ends with a *painless death.* Pain is virtually absent in Tolstoy's writings on religion and morality—the Kingdom of God does not seem to allow for suffering, which by its nature is irrational, evil, and antithetical to the law of love. The aim is to *eliminate* pain and suffering, in life and in death. Even in his seminal study of dying, the novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich,* pain is timeless and spiritualized, and Ivan Ilyich's struggle with death is interpreted as a process of spiritual awakening, his acceptance comes "in a detachment that suggests the attainment of a theological position almost outside of time" (Morris 36).[2]

Tolstoy himself was often a witness to death, as one by one members of his large family succumbed to illness and suffered with varying degrees of strength against the ravages of physical and spiritual degeneration. Yet he could never accept pain and suffering in any meaningful terms, other than the as the "will of God." When his four-year old son Alexis died, Tolstoy found a way of avoiding death by applying hard logic:

> All I can say is that the death of a child, which I once thought incomprehensible and unjust, now seems reasonable an good… My wife has been much afflicted by this death and I, too, am sorry to see the little boy I loved is no longer here, but despair is only for those who shut their eyes to the commandment by which we are ruled. (*Ilyich* 21)

Ivan Ilyich, like Tolstoy himself, eventually comes to "scale a religious height from which he views… pain—even agonizing, excruciating, terminal pain—as truly insignificant" (Morris 37). It is interesting to note that, although ravaged by intellectual doubts and spiritual despair (whose reality cannot be denied, nor completely extracted from physical suffering) Tolstoy never had to undergo the sufferings and anguish of those survival-strugglers to whom he preached his message of love—i.e, the destitute, homeless, diseased, hungry, outcast millions.

Tolstoy's disdain for pain can be seen most graphically in his contempt for the suffering Christ. Maxim Gorky remarks, "Whenever Tolstoy speaks about Christ, it is always [without] enthusiasm, with no feeling in his words, and no spark of real fire… I think he regards Christ as simple and deserving of pity, and although at times he admires him, he hardly loves him" (Steiner 262). Tolstoy's ideal of Christ is the serene Christ who undergoes all punishment and torture with a smile of triumph; the Christ of Raphael, not that of Grünewald or Holbein. Even as such, the weakness of Jesus astounds and disturbs Tolstoy, and perhaps contributes to his dismissal of Christ's divinity. How could God suffer, and still be the Almighty?

The Radical Freedom of Divinity: Dostoevsky & Berdyaev

Tolstoy's literature has said all that it has to say… [he] has done an excellent job of reproducing the word of the aristocracy. But this word was also the last, and the new word which will succeed this landowner's word has not yet arrived.
– Fyodor Dostoevsky

The contrast between Tolstoy and fellow Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) is often exaggerated for polemical purposes, but there is no doubt that, in terms of the meaning of freedom and suffering, the two writers diverge significantly. Dostoevsky once remarked, "The Saviour did not descend from the cross because he did not wish to convert men through the compulsion of an outward miracle, but through freedom of belief."[20] For Tolstoy this is *precisely* the failure of Christ's mission; in that refusal came the chaos and blindness that have afflicted human beings ever since. As George Steiner put is, "Christ had infinitely complicated the task of those who would establish his kingdom by placing the enigma of his silence across the straight path of reason" (Steiner 262).

Tolstoy chastises Christ for not revealing Himself (if, indeed, he *was* God) in messianic splendor, for though human belief might have been in some sense constrained, doubt would have been removed and evil vanquished, allowing for an immediate Kingdom of God upon the earth—among, if not within us. Steiner adequately sums up Tolstoy's feelings in this regard: He "could not love a prophet who declaimed that his kingdom was not of this world. The aristocratic temper of the man, his love of physical energy and heroism, rebelled at Christ's meekness and pathos." For Tolstoy, Christianity is ultimately neither a divine revelation nor a historical phenomenon but a teaching that provides the meaning of existence on earth. As such, there can be no meaning to that which destroys or abrogates life, except the meaning of negation.

Dostoevsky's religious thought is centered on the tragedy of freedom: man as a spiritual being is free, terribly free; he is free not only to save himself but to destroy himself by means of freedom. (Spinka 213) The Dostoevskian ethic is a world-shaping ethic that integrates *eros* and sexuality, understanding and feeling, heart and head. Nikolai Berdyaev's "ethic of creativeness" rests in large part upon the Dostoevskian premises and ideals, and on a certain conception of freedom in particular. Indeed, Berdyaev accepts Eduard von Hartmann's expansion of the domain of ethics to include in it relations to *every kind of value*, whether cognitive or aesthetic: "Ethics embraces everything that is connected with human freedom" (Berdyaev *Destiny* 22). Like his mentor Dostoevsky—an apostle, first and foremost, of freedom—Berdyaev rejected even absolute moral norms. Though, like most pacifist anarchists, he was repulsed by violence and war, he realized that in certain situation these were inevitable, in order to forestall greater human suffering, greater evil.

In short, in the Berdyaevan ethics of creativeness, humanity is redeemed from the Law in order to create: "The moral problems of life cannot be solved by an automatic application of universally binding rules… It is impossible to say that in the same circumstances one ought always and everywhere to act in the same way" (Clarke 135). Law, says Berdyaev, while necessary for our sinful world, is not the source of ethics but rather a byproduct, and one that must be ceaselessly transcended. This new conception of ethics changes the way one views the battle against evil: evil is now to be transfigured creatively, not simply crushed out. This "ethics of exuberance"—of more life—is directed always to-

wards others as well as the self, and even to the cosmos that it seeks to transfigure. Fired by imagination and the constant process of envisioning different and better lives, the imagination of the perfect kingdom must not tempt us, says Berdyaev, to enforce it at all costs—enforced perfection is the kingdom of the Grand Inquisitor. The tragedy of ethics for Berdyaev thus emerges not in the battle of good and evil but in the conflict between one good and another, between competing moral visions that cannot be simply resolved. The ethics of creativeness is not without incumbent risks; indeed, it is in some sense defined by risk: for though creativeness, more than anything else, is reminiscent of humanity's prelapsarian vocation, our sinful nature distorts creativeness and leads it into dangerous and dubious realms.

The Suffering God

The goal of crude subjectivism is stasis; the absence of pain, the achievement of undisturbed repose. This stasis yields an all-embracing placidity that dissolves anger into love, action into contemplation, willfulness into passivity. The absence of emotional differentiation means the end of real emotion.
– Murray Bookchin

Part of the risk of ethics is the risk of suffering. According to Dorothee Soelle, the story of Jesus' Passion can be seen as a narrative about suffering. It is falsified, she says, whenever it is robbed (as in High Renaissance art) of the dimensions of pain, terror, and anguish: "It is the story of a man whose goal is shattered… [b]ut this despair over his own cause would be incomplete—and below the level of human suffering—without the physical and social experience the story describes" (Sölle 16). This is a vision that Tolstoy could not share, and his blindness in this regard impinges upon Tolstoyan ethics as a whole. Tolstoy's vitality is the stuff of legend—Steiner speaks of the "excess of every life-force" that enabled him to pass into his ninth decade "every inch a king," laboring to the end of his days, "unbent, pugnacious, rejoicing in his autocracy" (14). While he would agree with Sölle (and Gautama Buddha) that "the only humanely conceivable goal is the abolition of circumstances under which people are forced to suffer," Tolstoy did not go as far as Sölle's second stage, a critical and hermeneutical examination not only of the possibility of eliminating misery but of "the persons through whom this process is carried out" (Sölle 2). Here we must delve into the question, "*Who* is working on the abolition of social conditions which of necessity produce suffering?"—and further, we must question the very language, concepts, and images upon which the call to end suffering is based, *even when it is framed in terms of non-violence and pacifism*.

Sölle rails against the apathy which often arises from the ideal of a life free from suffering and the illusion of the possibility of painlessness; the sort of "cultured despair" we so often see in the West, and which comes out strongly in the writings of Schopenhauer (and through him, on occasion, in Tolstoy). The "modern perspective," asks solely about the causes and abolition of suffering, without asking, "What is the meaning of suffering and under what conditions can it make us more human?" (Sölle 4) Of course, there is a danger of taking this to imply submission to suffering and violence, but, as Rollo May has argued, it may be that it is by *avoiding* the issue of pain and violence, making them negations or evils, that we perpetuate the cycle of their use: true resistance to pain, suffering, and oppression must involve at first a recognition of the "meaningfulness" of such. For such a realization we must go beyond the Tolstoyan rational man and take into account the words of Dostoevsky's "underground man" (according to the author, "the real man of the Russian majority"), who proclaims that, while "reason is a good thing, [it is] only reason and satisfies only man's intellectual facilities, while volition is a manifestation of the whole of life, I mean the whole of life *including* both reason and speculation" (*Notes* 35). Combating oppression in our time, when, as Michel Foucault has so poignantly perceived, power is diffuse and often disembodied, that is to say, located within systems of discourse as well as in social, political and economic structures, must involve not only an ethic to combat the obvious abuses of power but also the more deeply embedded oppression that has its root in a way of thinking, speaking, and conceptualizing the world; one that transcends rationalism and the claims to absoluteness even in terms of divine moral law.[3]

The ethic of creativeness put forth by Berdyaev and accepted by Bookchin and Welch is not a bourgeois idealization of aesthetics and so-called high culture. As Berdyaev says of Gogol and Russian literature since his time, "it seeks truth and righteousness and teaches the bringing of truth into actual life… Russian literature was not born of a happy creative profession, but of suffering and the painful fate of mankind, out of the search for salvation for all men" (Clark 45). Nowhere is this more evident than in the figure of Dostoevsky, who shunned the "landowner literature" of Tolstoy and Turgenev in favor of the literature of the underclass—of want, suffering, hope, fear, anger. Again, it is not an ethic based in dogma of certainty, nor one striving for homogeneity, but one rather directed by the moral discourses at our disposal, particularly the gospel message as it has been interpreted through the eyes of freedom and creativeness, and of a love which is not in the spirit of self-sacrifice but of radiance, as in the love of God. Most importantly, suffering is not denied but is incorporated without being idealized as such. Suffering is the price we must pay, says Dostoevsky, not for sin, but for freedom, which even the divine being cannot take away from us.

Re-imaging Christ and God: Nonviolence De-absolutized

I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence.
– Frantz Fanon

Dostoevsky, with his uncanny insight into the anatomy of the intellect, recognized in Tolstoy the ghost of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: beyond Tolstoy's profession of love for mankind lurked "an alliance between a doctrine of social perfectibility, a theology built on reason… and a desire to eliminate from men's lives the sense of paradox and tragedy"—in short, a Christianity *sans* the Passion of Christ, and in no real need of God except as a divine dispenser of the truth that is rational moral love. (Steiner 326). Rollo May argues that if the gods are occupied with keeping humanity in subordination, we can simply rid ourselves of them and accept with the rationalists (and Tolstoy) Jesus as the sensitive human being he was. Yet, May continues, "that is to misunderstand the function of the gods… We are always enlarging our insights and visions [and] to simply deny the 'god function' in human life is to impoverish our lives, specifically our ideals and our visions" (May 225). For those who consider themselves "religious," enlarg-

ing and purifying one's insights (about justice and ethics) and visions (about a better world), leads to the enlarging of one's symbols of the divine. Mary Daly, in *Beyond God the Father,* takes on the task of "de-reifying" the very term "God"—changing our perception/conception of divinity away from the traditional Supreme Being and Almighty Lawgiver (an image steeped in male/masculine imagery) to one more fitting to a liberation not just of women but of humankind. Without the complete and radical freedom to choose, what is God but another in a long line of kings? Even a king of love and nonviolence does violence by "His" nature as absolute and almighty arbiter.

In *Anarchism and Christianity*, Jacques Ellul claims that the author of Genesis (the one known to Biblical scholars as "J") finds our human fault in the attitude of wanting to become gods knowing good and evil instead of *being with God* in the enjoyment of life and the pleasure of creating. (97) It may be that we have been so concerned with naming and knowing the divine that we have forgotten how to simply be with the divine. "I AM that which can say 'I AM'." An enigmatic name, to be sure, but a vital prescription for action. The YHWH of the J writer (whom Harold Bloom intuits, without much evidence beyond perceived irony, is a woman) is one quite different from the God of the normative Jewish and Christian traditions. YHWH is an "endless exuberance of energy," "presence, the will to change," "origination and originality," and YHWH's leading quality is "not holiness, or justice, righteousness, or [even] love, but the sheer energy and force of becoming, of breaking into fresh being" (Bloom *J* 294). Although this image of divine Being is one that may not be holier than we are, it,

> is in every sense livelier than we are, because he is not to be distinguished from living more abundantly, living more like David, who had exhausted every human possibility and went on in the fullness of being, open to more experience, more love, more grief, more guilt and suffering, more dancing in exuberance before the Ark of Yahweh. (295)

For all his vitality and energy, Leo Tolstoy could not accept such an image of life-giving freedom as God, but preferred an abstract (almost Aristotelian) unmoved mover whose law of love is transmitted by the ethical prophet Jesus, and by his latter-day (and more heroic) descendent, Tolstoy himself.[4]

An alternative way of imaging God is as a being not only transcendent and life giving, but also fragile—as human beings are constituted by God, God is sustained by humanity. Such fragility is not a lack in God, but is intrinsic to creative power, which elicits responses from others as it works. God should not be thought of as King or Lord, for as Ellul puts it, God's is a self-limited omnipotence, and this is not through caprice or fancy but because everything else would be in contradiction with God's very being, which is creative, free love. As we see on the road to Sodom, as well as at Jabbok, God lets Godself be prevailed upon, even if such is not always met with "success." For Rollo May the curious phenomenon of Abram taking God to task for not living up to God's own principles (which, he says, is repeated throughout the First Testament: figures rebelling against God in terms of a different vision of what God *ought* to be and stand for), makes no sense when we define God as the all-perfect, purely ineffable Being. "But it makes sense when we see God… as the confluence of the Ground of Being (the *give* aspect of life) and man's own capacity for spiritual insight (the *autonomous* aspect of individual man)" (225).

For Daly this comes down to a question of models, and whether we might be better off without such, just as Sharon Welch calls into question our "need" for homogeneity, harmony, and absoluteness. A great deal of Christian doctrine has indeed been docetic (even, oddly, the explicit Arianism of Tolstoy); it has not really accepted the limitations of Jesus-the-human, Jesus-the-sufferer, Jesus-the-doubter, Jesus-the-crucified-body, Jesus-the-deposed-corpse. Only when we overcome this image of a stoic and serene leader, the triumphant Christ of Raphael, will we be able to envisage the Christ of Dostoevsky, Hans Holbeim, and Matthias Grünewald, he who suffers horribly and cries out his forsakenness, and yet who is, in his pain and humility, one who can receive and give love without the disinterestedness of reason or the distance of omnipotence which characterizes what Soelle calls the "apathetic God" of the normative traditions.[5] This model is not primarily a lawgiver or teacher but one who transmits an "infectious freedom" (Daly 72)—one of what Max Weber calls the exemplary type of prophet who stands in a relation of personal identification with the divine, participating in an immanent, pantheistic principle of divinity and inviting others to participate in such. "Those who are really living on the boundary tend to spark in others the courage to affirm their own unique being."[6]

> The important thing, then, was the freedom and power of being in which [the followers of Jesus] participated, which enabled them to be their unique selves. The point was not blind imitation of Jesus' actions and views…. Jesus or any other liberated person who has this effect functions as model precisely in the sense of being a model-breaker, pointing beyond his or her own limitations to the potential of further liberation. (75)

Conclusions

> *Princess: What I want of you is this: they are sending him to the disciplinary battalion, and I cannot bear that. And it is you who has done it - you - you - you!*
> *Sarintsev: Not I—God has done it. And God knows how I pity you. Do not set yourself in opposition to the will of God. He is testing you. Bear it humbly.*
> *Princess: I cannot bear it humbly. My son is all the world to me, and you have taken him from me and have ruined him. I cannot accept it quietly.*

The above is a passage from a late play by Tolstoy, entitled "The Light that Shines in Darkness." In it, the author holds up to public ridicule and indictment his own most hallowed beliefs (G.B. Shaw: "he turned his deadly touch suicidally on himself"). The "hero" of the story, Sarintsev, destroys his own life and the lives of those who love him best by seeking to realize a program of Tolstoyan Christianity and ethics.[7] In the end the Princess kills Sarintsev and the dying reformer expresses uncertainty as to his mission. Tolstoy conceived of himself (and Jesus, minus his suffering) as one of Weber's "ethical prophets"; i.e., one who thinks of him/herself as an *instrument* of the divine will, having a *mission* to promulgate

an order for others which expresses that will. “Such a prophet tends to legitimate his teachings by reference to a concept of one or more gods who stand *outside* and *above* the world and legislate for it” (Talcott Parsons, Daly 165). Thus, for all Tolstoy’s immanent Christianity, God remains the Holy Other who is wholly other. As Mary Daly argues, following Talcott Parsons, the whole image of the “ethical type” is hierarchical: “It is a picture of an archetypical male who as an extension of his archetypically male God thrusts his will upon others while remaining aloof, not sharing in their experiences and concerns”—and, perhaps most significantly, in terms of an ethical prophet of nonviolence, *not sharing in their pain and suffering.*

Creative-transformative ethics and justice must go beyond the rhetoric of the Kingdom of God, however such is conceived. It involves an imperative for ethical action grounded in love and accountability, and one that brings equity into consideration, as concepts such as universal love and “brotherhood” neglect not only the specificity of suffering, but the prior injustices upon which the whole of contemporary discourse is built. Even the well-intentioned preaching of nonviolence can serve to perpetuate the systemic oppression of certain marginalized or dehumanized sectors of society. This is not, once again, to deny the validity of nonviolent resistance, but is an attempt to rethink the ethics of such in terms of prevailing power structures and the very language in which such has been framed. Is it merely a coincidence that Tolstoy, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King have all been accused of lack of concern for women’s justice, sexism, and in the case of Tolstoy at least, downright misogyny?[8] Daly makes the point that contemporary prophets of so-called revolutionary movements often use women without attempting to go beyond the sexist vocabulary and system in which both sides are entrenched. As Frantz Fanon once said, “I am a part of Being to the degree that I go beyond it.”[9] There may be no way to combine omnipotence with love, one or the other might have to be sacrificed, for love makes no sense without freedom, and freedom without love is a chimera. As such, the real tragedy of human life is the inevitability of choosing between values each intrinsically good but in frequent conflict, like those of nonviolence and liberation.

Notes

1. According to George Steiner, “We misread Tolstoy’s genius and the cast of his mind, if we underrate its inherent aristocracy. Tolstoy loved men from above. He spoke of their equality before God and of the generality of common sense. But he conceived of himself as a teacher, as someone subject to the privileges and obligations of eminence… No less than [Dostoevsky’s Grand] Inquisitor he saw in paternalism our ideal mode of relationship” (Steiner 226).
2. As David Morris reminds us in *Culture of Pain,* Tolstoy’s vision of a timeless, spiritualized pain is the creation of a writer whose motives in portraying pain as timeless are unavoidably personal, social, and historical, rooted in the specific populist, utopian Christianity from which Tolstoy drew his strength, and for whom he proselytized. (36)
3. According to Thomas Merton, the real moral issue of violence in the twentieth century has been obscured by archaic and mythical presuppositions: “We tend to judge violence in terms of the individual, the messy, the physically disturbing, the personally frightening. The violence we want to see restrained is the violence of the hood waiting for us in the subway or elevator. That is reasonable, but it tends to influence us too much. It makes us think that the problem of violence is limited to this very small scale and it makes us unable to appreciate the far greater problem of the more abstract, more global, more agonized presence of violence on a massive and corporate pattern.” In sum, “Violence today is white-collar violence, the systematically organized bureaucratic and technological destruction of man” (Merton 5).
4. Tolstoy could not take his Christian anarchism far enough to see its possibilities. “Laws are rules made [to] govern by means of organized violence,” he proclaims with Bakuninian wrath, the “non-compliance with which [leads to] the non-complier [being] subjected to blows, a loss of liberty, or even to being murdered” (Marshall 373). One could ask, with Arno Schmidt, “have these people never considered that God could be the guilty one?” (Sölle 20).
5. Matthias Grünewald (d.1528), a painter who captured, in his gory “Detail of Crucifixion” (c.1505-1515) the suffering of God more vividly perhaps than any other before or since. “It is a painting that uses pain to emphasize the ‘human-ness’ of Jesus and that gives point to the troubled prayer he makes in Gethsemane: ‘My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me’” (Morris 50). Dostoevsky, who was struck by Holbeim’s “Descent from the Cross,” a painting of an agonized Christ that challenges the gruesomeness of Grünewald, puts a reproduction of such in the house of Rogozhin, a character in *The Idiot,* who remarks: “I know that the Christian Church laid it down, even in the early ages, that Christ’s suffering was not symbolical but actual, and that His body on the cross was therefore fully and completely subject to the laws of nature. In the picture the face is fearfully crushed by blows, swollen, covered with fearful, swollen and blood-stained bruises, the eyes are open and squinting: the great wide-open whites of the eyes glitter with a sort of deathly, glassy light.” Soelle: “From the modern perspective, Jesus’ dignity *lies precisely in his fear of death.* A person out fear is deformed, despising himself too much to be able to have fear for himself. Fear is a sign that a person’s roots are planted in life” (Sölle 80, my emphasis).
6. Sölle cites Kim Malthe-Bruun, a martyr of the Danish Resistance to Nazism: “the teaching of Jesus should not be something that we follow just because we have been taught to do so… At this moment there comes to me, as one of the profoundest truths I have learned from Jesus, the perception that one should live according to the dictates of one’s soul” (35).
7. “With pitiless veracity Tolstoy shows the man’s blindness, his egotism, and the ruthlessness which can inspire a prophet who believes himself entrusted with revelation” (Steiner 129).
8. Tolstoy held quite blatantly misogynist ideas: If not prepared to bear children, a woman must either be chaste, or a whore; sex is the greatest evil and women are a constant temptation to sex. His wife Sonya: “He cried aloud today that his most passionate desire was to get away from his family… He is so full of Christianity and the idea of self-perfection… God help me!” (Chute 92) The *Kreutzer Sonata* begins with a “proof” that “women of our society have no other interests in life than prostitutes have.” Again, Sonya: “If only the people who read *KS* with such feeling of veneration could look for a moment at the erotic life he lives—and which alone makes him happy and cheerful—they would cast this little God from

the pedestal on which they have placed him." (Chute 106-107) Though less extreme, Mary Daly makes the point that King was "patently unconcerned with women's oppression," and cites his wife, Coretta Scott King, as saying that all through his life her husband had an ambivalent attitude concerning the role of women. Thank god for women's diaries.

9. Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), the Antillean/Algerian psychologist and essayist whose *Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin, White Masks,* called for black liberation, using violence when necessary (as in colonial Algeria), argues for going *beyond rationality* as the "white man" has known it. "The dignity of the blacks will spring not merely from their brains but from their total organism and their collective unconscious, which is an expression of their organism… They [blacks] are climbing toward a new order, toward new forms, and these are part of a new rationality. The old order and old forms will be destroyed in the process, but no sane person would argue that the forms of colonial society, based upon inhuman sexual, social, and economic exploitation of the blacks…ought not to be broken… What follows it can scarcely be more unjust; let us hope that it will be more just" (Fanon, in May 194).

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