

Title: The Vanity of Renunciation and the Validity of Anger: Problems in Tolstoyan Thought
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Those familiar with Tolstoy's biography know that the writer conducted a brief correspondence in his final year with M. K. Gandhi, who called Tolstoy the "Russian Titan" and "the highest living moral authority," and signed himself "a humble follower of your doctrine." Tolstoyism—in particular its advocacy of non-resistance to evil—played an essential role in Gandhi's thinking and the evolution of his own doctrine of non-violent resistance in the struggle for Indian independence.

Gandhi, of course, was not alone: the tenor of Tolstoy's new creed resonated for many progressive-minded idealists interested in bettering society without resorting to the horrors of war and violence. Jane Addams, founder of the Hull House settlement in Chicago, like many of her contemporaries, turned to Tolstoy, because she saw him as someone who possessed the courage of his convictions and the ability "to translate his theories into action."

Yet one could argue that there is—ironically—a certain moral ambiguity underlying some of the essential tenets of Tolstoyism. In his famous essay on Gandhi, George Orwell concluded that Gandhi's asceticism and self-denial amounted to a rejection of humanism, that the "other-worldly" ideal of "non-attachment" was essentially incompatible with the "humanistic ideal" of seeking happiness in the context of the realities of this world. In "Tolstoy, Lear, and the Fool," Orwell levels a similar indictment against Tolstoy and Tolstoyism, suggesting that Tolstoy's "huge and gratuitous act of renunciation" was motivated by vanity, and that his quest for the Kingdom of Heaven represents a rejection of the humanist acknowledgment that life on this earth—with all its imperfections, messiness, and inequities—is what we must deal with.

Following the lead of Orwell, this paper questions to what extent there is an essential moral irresponsibility in Tolstoyism, in particular with respect to non-resistance to evil and avoidance of anger. Using the examples of Gandhi and Addams, as well as Chekhov's "Ward Six," it examines the ways Tolstoyism in practice confirms the validity of that question.