

Colm McKeogh, *Tolstoy's Pacifism* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2009), 233 pp.

Appearing on the eve of the Tolstoy centenary in 2010, this unpretentious book addresses its subject from a perspective seldom encountered in the mainstream of Tolstoy studies: proclaiming itself 'a work of political science', it offers an account of the novelist as 'a Christian thinker on political violence' (ix). The author, who teaches political science at Waikato University and has to his credit monographs on Reinhold Niebuhr and the morality of the 'just war', writes primarily for those seeking a 'faith-based attitude' to the problems of politics and violence, but canvasses issues of interest to anyone grappling with the beliefs, contradictions and prejudices that define Tolstoy's worldview.

The volume begins with a short account of the novelist's life, drawing (it must be said) exclusively on English-language sources, most notably perhaps A. N. Wilson. The specialist reader is unlikely to discover anything new here and may deprecate the broad-brush approach, but this initial chapter does provide an essential biographical context and introduces a key methodological feature that distinguishes the work as a whole: the interlarding of the author's text with translations of (sometimes substantial) excerpts from Tolstoy's own writings – diaries, letters, pamphlets, but also the novels and short stories – which illustrate and extend the argument. It also adumbrates the topics (history, religion, pacifism, politics and sex) examined *seriatim* in the chapters that follow.

War and Peace and the philosophy of history expounded in it are perhaps an obvious starting point for a discussion of Tolstoy's quest for some unifying ideal to counter his realist's perception of the haphazardness and apparent meaninglessness of human life. Rejecting any notion that the individual can 'change history', Tolstoy embraces a 'nonconsequentialist ethic' ('an ethic that does not seek to change the course of events or bring about particular outcomes', 51) and even before his 'conversion' is drawn to the notion of a life lived according to God's law of harmony, love and peace. Logically enough, McKeogh next examines his subject's religious ideas, and in particular his interpretation of Christ's teachings, with its renunciation of the ecclesiastical tradition and its emphasis on the godly life of poverty, pacifism and non-violence. Finding that Tolstoy was 'a religious pacifist, rather than an ethical or political one' (101), the author goes on in his fourth chapter to critique the theological underpinning of the Tolstoyan creed. In a discussion that ranges from the Sermon on the Mount

to the Constructive Programme of Gandhi and from the epistles of Paul to the commentaries of Niebuhr, McKeogh elucidates the moral implications of non-violence, non-resistance and non-violent resistance as responses to the problem of evil and concludes that Tolstoy's pacifism, with its rejection of violence even as a means to a just or altruistic end and its overtones of passive acceptance, is 'rigid, legalist, uncreative, dispirited, and loveless' (125). Its political implications are the subject of the following chapter: the rejection of violence and coercion leads logically to the rejection of the state, of property and of politics itself. Despite his political campaigns on behalf of the Dukhobors and the 'Molokhans' (sc. Molokans, 154), Tolstoy remained a Christian anarchist for whom all political action was an offence against the law of God. Chapter 6, largely on the basis of *The Kreutzer Sonata*, argues for a similarly 'strong connection' (187) between Tolstoy's pacifist rejectionism and the repudiation of human sexual activity that finds its fullest expression in that work: for sex can only be a distraction from the single-minded 'pursuit of 'the Christly ideal' of love and peace (188) which ultimately outweighs any concern, not just for the continued existence of human society and civilization, but for the perpetuation of the species itself. A final chapter ('Legacy') draws attention to the inconsistencies in the novelist's Christian pacifism, concluding that 'it was not God that Tolstoy loved, but God's law' (201). Acutely conscious of the problem – the evil in the world as he saw it – he could offer no solution, believing neither in the hope of divine redemption nor the efficacy of human intervention and rejecting all but passive resistance. For that reason, his political and religious legacy is that of a dissident, rather than of a prophet, activist, reformer, idealist or theorist (216).

Not all readers will be comfortable with McKeogh's 'faith-based' perspective or occasionally evangelical tone, and some may question how far 'the ever-intolerant Tolstoy' (183) who emerges in the foregoing chapters really did embrace 'the message of universal love and brotherhood' (217), as the final paragraph claims; but most will recognise in *Tolstoy's Pacifism* an erudite, succinct, sympathetic and generally well-written discussion of the evolution of the belief-system underlying the whole of the writer's *œuvre*. While it makes no claim to be a work of literary scholarship, it demonstrates familiarity with the wide range of criticism available in English and will be read with profit by all students of Tolstoy's life and art.

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