

# Leo Tolstoy and the Mennonites

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In a scene set in 1913, three years after Leo Tolstoy's death, novelist Al Reimer has some young artists and students discussing the Russification of the Mennonites living in the Ukraine and comparing German orderliness, hard work and piety with Russian passion, slovenliness and artistic creation. "Where is our folk art, our great church music, our beautiful painting, our Pushkin, our Tolstoy?" a Mennonite youth asks P.M. Friesen, the well-known Mennonite historian.<sup>1</sup> Friesen eventually responds with a long exposition of art and suffering and the difference between the Russian and Mennonite experience and then faints. That effectively ends the discussion.

Most of the Russian Mennonite references to Tolstoy must be left to the literary imagination, because there is little evidence of Mennonite interaction with or reference to Tolstoy while he lived. P.M. Friesen, himself, in his major work, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia*, made no substantive references to Tolstoy, however much he may have been aware of him. Johannes Harder concludes his excellent article on Tolstoy in *Mennonitisches Lexikon* by noting that "hardly any Russian Mennonite scholars wrote about or were followers of Tolstoy."<sup>2</sup>

This may be true, but many twentieth-century Mennonites might have wished it were otherwise. By the mid-twentieth century the Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Mennonite attorney and family historian Samuel S. Wenger laments: "It seems to me that both Tolstoy and the Mennonites lost much because they did not meet each other."<sup>3</sup> And yet, several leading twentieth-century Mennonite scholars owe their most fundamental ideas to the Russian novelist and moralist.

This essay explores the relationship of the Mennonites to Tolstoy. The first part deals with the Mennonites who lived in the Russian Empire or wrote about Tolstoy during his lifetime, and the second part deals with the North American Mennonites and Tolstoy. In a secondary way Tolstoy, because of the purity of his nonresistance, becomes a stage on which to view the ethical and theological ideas of twentieth-century Mennonite leaders and intellectuals as they have related to him.

A good starting point for a study of Tolstoy and the Mennonites is provided by Johannes Harder's excellent mid-century essay in *Mennonitisches Lexikon*. Harder reviews Leo Tolstoy's life from his birth on August 28, 1828, up to his well documented death on November 7, 1910. He traces his development as a writer in his greatest works (*War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*) and his "great conversion" to nonresistant Christianity and social change. Harder notes the intellectual influences on Tolstoy and his special sympathy for the Russian religious sects. Recognizing Tolstoy's interest in non-orthodox groups like the Quakers, Harder concludes his essay by noting the Mennonite connection:

Last but not least, Tolstoy turned towards the Mennonites. With reference to [Peter] Chelchicki [The fifteenth-century founder of the Bohemian-Moravian Brotherhood] he wrote: 'Chelchicki taught the same nonresistance that followers of the Mennonites, Quakers and in earlier times the Bogomilers, the Paulists and many others learned and taught.' As early as 1853 [Tolstoy] cited [the Mennonites] in his journal. He knew about their settlements in Ekaterinoslav. In 1885 he cited them in a letter to [Vladimir] Chertkov, his private secretary, in which Tolstoy expressed interest in them because of their nonresistance.... 'I also knew that there have existed, and still exist certain sects—Mennonites, Hutterites, Quakers—who forbid the use of arms and shun war service...' In 1898 [the Mennonites] are again mentioned in his journal as advocates of nonresistance. [For Tolstoy] this was the way to pacify the world. Just how close Tolstoy was to Mennonitism cannot be determined considering how deeply his understanding of the gospel was rooted in rationalism and moralism. In German literature Ferdinand von Wahlberg has tried to associate the Mennonites of Russia with Tolstoy. In actuality, there were scarcely any professed disciples or followers of Tolstoy among them."<sup>4</sup>

## II

One exception to Johannes Harder's conclusion was Harder himself. Born in the Alexanderthal Mennonite settlement on the Volga in 1903, he was educated in Germany and lived there during his adult life. Among other books, he wrote one on the Russian novelists Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Leskov and Tolstoy.<sup>5</sup> As the author of *No Strangers in Exile* and other German novels, Harder understood Tolstoy both as an intellectual and as his distant disciple. A radical who believed the Sermon on the Mount is the foundation of the Christian faith, Harder remained until his death in 1987 an acute critic of bourgeois life.

Late in life this German-Russian Mennonite intellectual and writer became a sort of mentor to a second generation of Canadian Mennonite litterateurs such as Al Reimer and Harry Loewen. Al Reimer has said that Harder must “indubitably be counted among the most versatile and accomplished men of letters in the history of Mennonitenum.”<sup>6</sup> Harry Loewen recalls the time he and Harder visited novelist Rudy Wiebe in the mid-1980s. “We talked humorously about Wiebe and Harder being Tolstoys and Dostoyevskys! Wiebe even resembles Tolstoy physically and Harder used to wear consistently a Tolstoy shirt held together with a rope-like belt.”<sup>7</sup> Rudy Wiebe will be dealt with as a Mennonite writer later in this study.

Another Mennonite writer who should be mentioned here is Dietrich Neufeld (1886-1958), or Dedrich Navall as he wished to be known during the latter part of his life when he taught French, German and Russian literature in California colleges.<sup>8</sup> Near the end of his life Neufeld, author of *A Russian Dance of Death*, wrote to Tolstoy’s daughter Alexandra that he recalled passing near Yasnaya Polyana, Tolstoy’s estate, in 1908 when he was a young teacher. “I tried to teach in the spirit of Tolstoy, whom I revered and whose Primer I knew.” In 1910, as a university student in Basel, Switzerland, Neufeld recalled reading in the evening paper that Tolstoy had died. “I was numb, I do not know how long, but I stopped eating—and it was a vegetarian meal, too—and left at length like in a daze. It seemed as if the world had grown colder and dimmer because a great spiritual light just had gone out...”<sup>9</sup>

Neufeld’s relationship with Alexandra Tolstoy, to whom he wrote in fawning praise of her book *Tolstoy, A Life of My Father*, was, however, short-lived. He soon claimed that she was “one of the many so-called white Russians in America who did not appreciate her father’s spiritual greatness.”<sup>10</sup> The summer before Neufeld’s death, his widow Lotta noted that he was reading Tolstoy extensively, and in a marked copy of Tolstoy’s book *What Then Must We Do?* Neufeld wrote: “I feel the urge to buy enough copies of this work and give it to everyone with whom I come in contact.”<sup>11</sup>

Neufeld’s attachment to Tolstoy seems more sentimental than substantial. Neufeld became somewhat of an academic dandy who seemed as interested in Tolstoy’s fame as in his ideas. A Neufeld researcher notes that Neufeld may have tried to associate himself with Tolstoy “because he thought he was of the same literary caliber.”<sup>12</sup> Neufeld’s archival collection contains numerous letters to the likes of Rousseau, Freud, Jung, Einstein, John Dewey, and Willa Cather, all of which have the distinct flavor of a minor academic seeking major league status by collecting autographs.

A more unlikely but much more authentic candidate to carry the Tolstoyan mantle was Jacob Gerhard (J.G.) Ewert (1874-1923) of Hillsboro, Kansas. This turn-of-the-century Mennonite Brethren brought Tolstoy’s ideas to the Mennonites of Kansas. He privately published *Die Christliche Lehre von der Wehrlosigkeit Briefwechsel zwischen Graf Leo Tolstoi von Russland und Prediger Adin Ballou von Amerika*.<sup>13</sup> These letters had previously been published by Lewis G. Wilson

in *Arena* and were translated into German by Ewert himself. The letters discuss the differences between Tolstoy's extreme pacifism and the somewhat more moderate claims of the American abolitionist and nonresistant Adin Ballou. Tolstoy argues for complete nonresistance and claimed that one should not even restrain an insane person. Ballou thinks that one might restrain such a person, even if one would not kill him. The letters are reprinted verbatim with only transition sentences to tie them together. But in this debate Ewert is closer to Tolstoy than Ballou is. James C. Juhnke writes a fascinating profile of this remarkable man who though bedfast the last 25 years of his life "became a mediator of Karl Marx, Leo Tolstoy, and Walter Rauschenbusch to an unreceptive community. The cosmopolitan spirit came to Hillsboro through the most obviously limited man in town."<sup>14</sup> Sounding clear and simple themes, like the Catholic Worker radicals of a generation later in American life, Ewert declared capitalism, militarism and alcoholism as the three greatest enemies of civil peace. He wanted to replace this "demonic trilogy" with Christian socialism, Christian pacifism, and Christian temperance.

Elements of Ewert's pacifism and temperance were accepted by the Mennonite community, but his socialism was not. It is of considerable credit to both Ewert and his church community that from 1885 to the end of his life he lived in Hillsboro, Kansas, as a Mennonite Brethren editor, writer and teacher. An ardent pacifist, Ewert advised many young men drafted in World War I and clearly did this private publication of Tolstoy in order to stimulate more pacifist conviction in his church. Juhnke concludes that Ewert's "significance lay in the fact that he was accepted and loved by his fellow brethren in spite of dissenting views."<sup>15</sup>

The oral tradition reveals a few more early Russian Mennonite connections to Tolstoy. In 1980, at Bethel College Mennonite Church in Newton, Kansas, Donald D. Kaufman delivered a sermon on Tolstoy's story of Martin the shoemaker, "Looking at Life Through a Basement Window." In this sermon he mentioned that he had heard this story in a sermon by Russell Mast, and that Mast said he got it from Cornelius Krahn who recalled having attended a special conference in Russia on the tenth anniversary of Tolstoy's death, which would have been in 1920 when Krahn was eighteen.<sup>16</sup>

Pacifist historian Peter Brock toward the end of his career said that the pacifism of the Mennonites in Russia before and after World War I was a "promising topic for monographic research. It would call for disentangling the ideas and influences of several groups with which Mennonites had some contact, such as the Molokans, Stundists, Baptists, and especially the Tolstoyans."<sup>17</sup> However promising this project may seem, at this point the evidence does not suggest much interaction between the Mennonites and the Tolstoyans during Tolstoy's lifetime.

Ironically, if the Russian Mennonites had little interaction with Tolstoy, the American Mennonites had more, mainly, one might note, by accident. One of Tolstoy's earliest borrowings is a quotation from the American Mennonite Daniel Musser (1810–1877) in Tolstoy's ethical masterpiece *The Kingdom of*

*God Is Within You* (1893).<sup>18</sup> Johannes Harder has noted the interest which Tolstoy had in the sects, especially those with a belief in nonresistance. Tolstoy corresponded with the son of American abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison (1805-1879) and received numerous publications from Garrison and the Quakers, among them the Reformed Mennonite Musser's work, *Non-Resistance Asserted: or the Kingdom of Christ and the Kingdom of this World Separated*. This booklet originally appeared in 1864 during the Civil War in the United States, and Tolstoy summarizes it appreciatively in *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*. Tolstoy found Musser's argument for non-resistance convincing, especially as it was written during a civil war, and he admired Musser's dogmatic methodology of following a conviction wherever it leads. Nowhere in the work, however, does Tolstoy identify Musser as a Mennonite, and it is understandable that Harder would not have made the association either. Tolstoy in *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* makes numerous references to the Mennonites as conscientious objectors to war and to their doing forestry service.<sup>19</sup> As already noted, Harder also notes a few other references by Tolstoy to the Mennonites.

Perhaps the lack of Mennonite interaction in Russia during Tolstoy's lifetime was in part because of Tolstoy himself. Tolstoy was not only a pacifist but also a Slavophile. His inclination would have been to look for his pacifist examples among the native Russian sects such as the Molokans or the anarchistic Dukhobors. The relatively wealthy German Mennonite colonists, after all, lived a bourgeois life not too dissimilar from that of his own embattled family. Tolstoy and the Mennonites who lived nearby were looking in opposite directions. Tolstoy scorned the czars and the Romanov court and admired the Russian people, idealizing the muzhik in his literature (at least until his famous deathbed mutter: "How do the *muzhiks* die?").

The Mennonites in Ukraine had a sense of patriotism with regard to the czars who had given them a home, but considered themselves superior to the Russian people. Most Russian Mennonite intellectuals turned their imaginations more to Basel and Stuttgart for inspiration than to St. Petersburg and Moscow. Furthermore, Tolstoy's rationalist, unorthodox Christianity, however nonresistant, would hardly have been looked to by Mennonites as a source for spiritual renewal. Perhaps for both the Mennonites and Tolstoy the relationship was better, or closer in a sense, if it were a continent apart and separated by time, or so at least it seemed to work out.

### III

Among the early North American leaders to take an interest in Tolstoy during his lifetime was the Elkhart, Indiana, editor and leader John F. Funk. Already in the early 1890s, he referred to Tolstoy in the news notes of his paper

*Herald of Truth*, and in 1896 he published two long successive articles on Tolstoy in the May and June issues.<sup>20</sup> On May 15, 1896, Funk ran a front-page article-length letter on Tolstoy and nonresistance under his "editorial notes." Funk noted that it was "almost universally known" that Tolstoy held radical beliefs on nonresistance and that some of Funk's readers were wanting to know how far his views were from those of the Mennonites, Friends and Brethren.

Funk then reprinted a lengthy letter from Tolstoy which had appeared in *The Voice*. The letter was to Ernest Crosby, an ex-assemblyman from New York who had embraced nonresistant views as well. Tolstoy addresses what he calls the "stock example," a robber killing a child, and that one can only save the child by killing the robber. The Christian is forbidden to kill the robber, and the non-Christian does not know which life is better to spare. The question is not one of consequences, he concludes, but to obey the one who sent us into this world and who has clearly shown us how to live or to resist. The detailed argument is resolved by endorsing a literal obedience to Christ's teaching. In the next issue, June 1, 1896, another article appeared entitled "Count Tolstoi and Patriotism." Did Funk's readers find out how close Tolstoy was to Mennonite teaching? Funk seemed to let the readers decide this for themselves, since he did not comment further on this theme in the issues which I scanned.

The fullest Mennonite assessment of Tolstoy during his lifetime originated in nearby Goshen, Indiana. Noah E. Byers (1873-1962), fresh out of Harvard University and in his first year as Goshen College's president, undertook this assignment. In the November, 1903, issue of *Goshen College Record*, C.K. Hostetler, the student editor, had written that he sometimes heard the statement that "Tolstoy would make a good Mennonite." He proposed to examine this proposition in future articles to give "our readers a clear picture of the real Tolstoy and correcting all erroneous conceptions."<sup>21</sup> The student editor hints that although in religious practice, such as simplicity of life and universal peace, Tolstoy's ideas harmonize with the Mennonites, he could hardly be considered a member in good standing. Byers, who was a philosopher as well as an administrator, took up the editor's challenge by writing an essay on "Tolstoy and American Communists," which ran in two issues.<sup>22</sup> Byers credited Tolstoy with being the most "convincing critic of the existing civic, social and industrial order," and proposed to examine his philosophy and compare it with four American communistic communities.

Byers was trying to "find some evidence as to the feasibility of the practical application of Tolstoy's theories to American conditions." Apparently, Byers felt no special need to comment on Tolstoy's nonresistance, considering this an area of general agreement. He focused rather on Tolstoy's anarchistic agrarian social theory, an area where he found no general agreement. Byers also reviewed Tolstoy's critique of Russian and industrial society in the "enforced system of monotonous toil," a form of slavery. He noted that the socialists singled out the responsibility for this evil in "ownership of land, taxes and

private property.” Because government is responsible for these evils, Tolstoy called for the abolition of government and the living together of peasants “by voluntary associations. Under such conditions each man supports himself by the labor of his own hands and thus fulfils an essential law of his nature.”

Byers summarized Tolstoy’s teaching of a better society as including: “the withdrawal of the present order, nonresistance, simple peasant life, association for the common good and a supreme devotion to the life of religion.” He noted four experiments of such societies: the non-marrying Shakers; the Amana Communities in Iowa; the Zoar Community in Tuscarawas County, Ohio; and finally Conrad Beissel’s Brethren communitarians at the Ephrata Cloisters in Pennsylvania. These communities, Byers noted, lived without “police, industrial, political or social bosses but live unselfish and peaceful lives.” He also noted the decline of these groups, the lagging of zeal when the first leaders passed from the scene, the consolidation of financial success by a few good financiers, the problem of the family, and the loss of “the intellectual and aesthetic life.”

Byers granted that these communities might have been better than Russian peasant life, but he wondered if they were “the highest ideal in the true sense? In the second place, can society be regenerated by those who withdraw from the present order and live secluded lives?” Byers, as a good progressive and Mennonite pragmatist who had studied under William James, says that with “modern methods of industry it is possible to produce more with less labor and thus gain time and means for cultivating and enjoying the higher interests of life. I am quite sure that in America the average man of industry and economy can live a life of more comfort and pleasure than is possible in any of these societies.”

As to the impulse to withdraw by these communal societies and merely “being good and worshiping,” Byers saw many shortcomings. “Should the Christian not rather be concerned with saving the world than with simply saving himself?” Byers senses Tolstoy’s critique as too radical for a democratic and progressive society such as the United States. On the other hand, he was offended by Tolstoy’s admiration for sectarian communalists, who were perhaps not unlike Byers’ own (Old) Mennonites:

We want more charity and not a system that makes charity useless; more honesty, but not a condition where dishonesty is impossible; more equality, but not enforced mediocrity; more peace, but not more lawlessness; less [sic] politicians, but more of the powers that be [which] are ordained of God; ‘less [sic] warriors to do violence,’ but more ministers of God, ‘revengers to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil’, less commercialism, but more capital for righteous causes; more Christianity, but not less of missionary zeal.

Byers called Tolstoy’s solution a “retreat to the past,” and said that the true prophet looks to the future, “the better time to come.”<sup>23</sup>

So Tolstoy clearly failed the test of Byers’ stern analysis at the turn of the century, an evaluation which Tolstoy would have accepted as a compliment. In 1910 Leo Tolstoy died and was buried among the peasants at Yasnaya Polyana.

His long shelf of novels and didactic writings on nonresistance, however, lived on in the twentieth century, and among his readers have been the Mennonites.

#### IV

After Tolstoy's death, his thought lived on in Russia through his writings and through his followers, the so-called Tolstoyans. Foremost among those followers was Tolstoy's controversial disciple Vladimir G. Chertkov. The Tolstoyans connected with the Mennonites organizationally during the brief and tragic chapter of Soviet recognition of conscientious objectors immediately following the Bolshevik Revolution. The Mennonites were a part of the United Society of Religious Societies that oversaw the procedures for the securing of conscientious objector status. This society, chaired by Chertkov, included not only Mennonites and Tolstoyans, but also Baptists, Pentecostals and Evangelical Christians.

An estimated 40,000 pacifists were exempted from military service under the 1919 proviso which brought the United Society of Religious Societies into being, many of these pacifists coming from the native Russian evangelical groups. With the consolidation of the Soviet state under Communism, however, the society became inactive after three years and was terminated in 1924. Although one might assume considerable interaction among these various evangelical, Mennonite, and Tolstoyan pacifist groups during these years, Walter Sawatsky calls it a "lost history."<sup>24</sup> Stalinism soon destroyed both Mennonite and Tolstoyan life in the Soviet Union.

As the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 violently shook the twentieth century, neither it nor Tolstoy went unnoticed by John Horsch, a Mennonite who became a protagonist in the fundamentalist-modernist debate among Christians in North America. If Tolstoy's pastoral, nonresistant anarchism made him problematic to Western progressives, it did not exactly bring him into the orthodox Christian fold either. Horsch, a German-Mennonite historian at Scottsdale, Pennsylvania, gave Tolstoy some credit for teaching nonresistance but saw this virtue canceled by his loss of faith in orthodox Christianity. "Therefore, though he was right on an important point, his influence did not count for the Christian cause. On the contrary, his rejection of supernatural religion, his teachings on communism and other points had a decidedly detrimental influence on the Russian people." In spite of his views on nonresistance, Horsch said, Tolstoy was largely instrumental in preparing the way for Bolshevism in Russia. Horsch commended the Russian Orthodox church for the courage to excommunicate "the greatest writer and most famous man of Russia for his flagrant infidelity," while noting that "our popular American churches would doubtless have welcomed [Tolstoy] into their fold."<sup>25</sup>

If Horsch found Tolstoy failing the test of Christian orthodoxy, Guy F. Hershberger found him failing the test of biblical nonresistance, which became the benchmark for (Old) Mennonite pacifism in his book *War, Peace, and Nonresistance*. Hershberger treats Tolstoy in a section where he compares "biblical nonresistance" to other forms of pacifism.<sup>26</sup>

Tolstoy believed with Rousseau that man is good; therefore the Sermon on the Mount is for all men, not merely for those who have been regenerated by divine grace. In other words, he identified the Kingdom of God with human society, after the manner of the social gospel. But since he believed in an absolute renunciation of violence for all men, Tolstoy was an anarchist, repudiating the state entirely. Biblical nonresistance declines to participate in the coercive functions of the state, but nevertheless regards coercion necessary for the maintenance of order in a sinful society, and not anarchistic.

Nevertheless, Hershberger noted that Tolstoy's anarchistic absolute pacifism might be closer to biblical nonresistance than Gandhi's program of nonviolence.

Twenty years after Hershberger, when J. Lawrence Burkholder, a graduate student at Princeton, was struggling with social responsibility and the Mennonite Church (and Hershberger's nonresistance), he found little help from Tolstoy. He noted that the earliest Anabaptists were not sentimentalists in regards to the state and the taking of life. "In other words, the Anabaptists can hardly be associated with, for example, the anarchism of Tolstoy. Tolstoy took a strictly monistic attitude toward ethics by his literal interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount and his uncompromising insistence that its principles should 'be embodied universally.'" Burkholder rightly noted that Tolstoy might have owed more to German idealism philosophically than to evangelical biblicism.<sup>27</sup>

Also in the mid-fifties, David Janzen wrote a series of five columns in *The Canadian Mennonite* on "Christianity and Communism" in which Tolstoy figured prominently. Janzen was writing for his Mennonite community which had escaped Russia and which had suffered grievously under Stalin's totalitarian rule.<sup>28</sup> Writing in somewhat of a counseling and pastoral style, Janzen was intent on establishing that Soviet communism, although related to Christian history, does not emerge from it. His second article "Tolstoy and Nonresistance" was a two-column introduction to both Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky.<sup>29</sup> Janzen noted that Tolstoy based his nonresistance on the Sermon on the Mount, but "his tragedy was that he only saw Christianity as a moral teaching and not as a revelation." Janzen admitted that Tolstoy's morality put "many a Christian to shame" and affirmed some of his characters as "being fools for Christ's sake." However, Tolstoy's extremism also led "to exaggerations which we don't like." Janzen then concluded his article with an appreciation for Dostoyevsky's "keen understanding of suffering" and of a Christian understanding of discipleship as being under the lordship of Christ.

After some analysis of both the terror and the appeal of Communism in the Soviet Union, Janzen concluded his series with "A Program for the Mennonite

Church.” Among his fifteen points for a people who had suffered so much under Communist rule is number eight: “Help our people to overcome vindictiveness and to really love their enemies.” Number nine exhorts: “When we have set our own house in order, we should try to use and integrate Russian literature as a corrective. For example bring Dostoiievski [sic] and Tolstoy together at the feet of Christ.”<sup>30</sup>

One of the most intriguing responses to Tolstoy comes from Samuel S. Wenger, a Lancaster, Pennsylvania, attorney and genealogist. Wenger developed a strong appreciation for the Russian writer after learning of the Daniel Musser connection, which he rediscovered for the Mennonites in the mid-fifties.<sup>31</sup> Wenger says he read (and even reread) all of Tolstoy’s works after his conversion and concludes that “all second hand sources on or about Tolstoy are completely unreliable and definitely misleading.”<sup>32</sup> He is especially critical of Guy F. Hershberger, whose statements about Tolstoy in *War, Peace, and Nonresistance* were gathered from secondary sources and “totally incorrect.” Unfortunately, Wenger did not spell out where Hershberger erred.

Wenger almost brings Tolstoy within the Lancaster Mennonite fold by noting that “the basic tenants of the religious faith which he expounded are strikingly similar to the basic tenants of the Mennonite Church.” Wenger appreciates the similarities with Tolstoy such as: protest against a state church, nonresistance, abstinence from alcohol, tobacco and sex, non-swearing of oaths, opposition to divorce, and eschewing law suits. Wenger generously notes that Tolstoy’s view of economics would have been at home among the Hutterites.

Two beliefs which appear on Wenger’s list reflect the Pennsylvania Mennonite’s own conference tradition as much as Tolstoy. Wenger’s Tolstoy wears a “plain coat” and is hard working. He notes that the writer “adopted a plain mode of dress” and that Tolstoy’s peasant shirt is a “frock sort of a coat without a collar.” Aside from the plain coat, Wenger also appreciates hard work: “[Tolstoy] also extolled the virtues of hard labor, particularly hand labor, and in so doing, adopted a way of life which has always been advocated by Mennonites.”

Wenger says he does not share the common view that Tolstoy merely accepted the ethical teachings of Jesus. To Tolstoy “belief in Jesus meant unequivocal acceptance of his teaching and in this [Tolstoy] went further than one would go if the acceptance were only on the level of ethics.” Wenger allows that Tolstoy may not have “gone the whole way in accepting the plan of salvation,” but he feels that this is regrettable for the lack of having an Aquila and Priscilla “who might have expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly.” Wenger concludes his charming appropriation of Tolstoy by noting “that both Tolstoy and the Mennonites lost much because they did not meet each other.”<sup>33</sup>

## V

A more sophisticated interpretation of Tolstoy would come from the most influential Mennonite academic interpreter of Christian pacifism in the latter half of the twentieth century. John H. Yoder recognizes Tolstoy as “the most important single figure, for our purposes, in the nineteenth century.”<sup>34</sup> “Leo Tolstoy stands second to none in his century in his commitment to be critical of the oppressive misuses which have been made of Christianity by the bearers of the fraudulent dignity of church and empire.” Yoder notes that the nineteenth century is often ignored in the telling of pacifist history, but he wants to recreate it with the peace societies, the restorationist Christian movements, and most of all with “Leo Tolstoy, the most widely read author of this century, creator more than any one person of the epic novel as a literary form, skilled reteller of folk tales and legends, autodidactic exegete more skilled in detailed linguistic interpretation of gospel texts than most scholars of his time in Western universities.”<sup>35</sup>

Yoder admits that Tolstoy’s latter decades of family life might have been “less nasty” had he absorbed more of Augustine, Luther, Wesley, Kierkegaard, and Keswick, but he finds it patronizing to make such a suggestion. Yoder, however, does not find it patronizing to read Tolstoy as a cautionary story, a “hobbled” giant whose world view is limited by insufficient options in Czarist Russia. Whether in regard to sexuality, wealth or nonresistance, Tolstoy chose severe and extreme options, which Yoder believes may owe as much to his “religion of establishment” opponents as to his nonresistant friends. And here he gives Tolstoy what in Yoder’s linguistic economy might be called a “back-handed compliment.” Tolstoy is a landmark of vulnerability in following the teachings of Jesus with such extreme literal obedience that he becomes a caricature of the religious establishment’s definition of a nonresistant: an extreme and impractical utopian.

In Yoder’s cautious interpretation of Tolstoy, one senses that he finds Tolstoy as embarrassing as he is admirable. One of Yoder’s chief objectives is to refute the Niebuhrian position that biblical pacifism is irrelevant politically and that Christ rejected culture. In Yoder’s attempt to construct a biblically based political pacifism which is both catholic and relevant, he clearly does not find Tolstoy’s extreme views, ranging from sex to anarchism, helpful. Yoder regrets that Tolstoy was not born in the latter half of the twentieth century where there are more “resources related to community, to system criticism, to constructive utopianism, to the potential pluralism, which can free us, both in logic and practice, from the dilemma of a pure but ineffective ‘faithfulness’ over against a compromised but effective ‘pragmatism.’”<sup>36</sup>

Although they were born more than a century apart and with quite different options and vocations, one might note several similarities between these two outstanding pacifist thinkers as well. Both have highly original minds and attempt to reread the New Testament Gospels as if for the first time. Even though they both reread the New Testament Gospels with a strong historicist perspec-

tive and used the most sophisticated scholarly tools available to them in their century, neither is primarily a historian in regard to Christian thought. Tolstoy uses history effectively in his epic novels, as Yoder does in his biblical studies. But for both, history is a vehicle to arrive at a larger purpose, which is to reread the pure New Testament gospel text in a catholic and true way.

Interestingly, in their fresh new readings of the Gospels, both Tolstoy and Yoder find compelling images for their respective generations. The brilliant novelist finds a nonresistant anarchist *muzhik* who captured the imagination of the world, even a populist American presidential candidate.<sup>37</sup> William Jennings Bryan visited Tolstoy and adopted a form of pacifism for a number of years. On the other hand, the brilliant biblical essayist Yoder finds a pacifist communal Messiah who fits in quite well with student radicalism of the sixties and a post-World War II generation politicized by one of the most unpopular wars in U.S. history. Yoder's Christ provides a language for academic Christians to think of themselves as catholic, political, and pacifist.<sup>38</sup>

If the twentieth-century's best-known Mennonite ethicist owes little directly to Tolstoy, one could say the same for its best-known Mennonite novelist, Rudy Wiebe. This is not to deny that Wiebe also has some common elements with Tolstoy or that his artistic views may not have something in common with Tolstoy's in the landmark essay "What is Art?"<sup>39</sup> Wiebe has on occasion been described as one "who views himself as standing in the tradition of Leo Tolstoy and William Faulkner." At a literary conference in Edmonton in 1979, Wiebe said confidently: "The whole purpose of art, of poetry, of story-telling is to make us good."<sup>40</sup> His is a minority voice among modern artists, but Tolstoy would have approved. Still, there is no primary influence to be found here in the sense that Tolstoy, both in thought and form, has influenced the American novelist John Gardner.<sup>41</sup>

If one looks to Russian novelists whose tone, thought and technique have influenced Wiebe's work, one would think of Dostoyevsky before Tolstoy. Wiebe's characters are tormented by guilt, and search for salvation much more in the spirit of *Crime and Punishment* and *The Brothers Karamazov* than in the epic earth-embracing stories of *War and Peace* or *Anna Karenina*. The closest one can come to a Tolstoyan novel in the Russian Mennonite tradition is A1 Reimer's *My Harp Is Turned to Mourning*. Unfortunately, Reimer has written only one novel, which is hardly sufficient evidence for making such a comparison.<sup>42</sup>

In critical studies of Wiebe's books, Tolstoy is treated as one among several writers as a source of inspiration.<sup>43</sup> As is the case with fellow-Mennonite Yoder, Wiebe's lack of continuity with Tolstoy in no way detracts from his considerable achievement. On the contrary, the originality of both Yoder and Wiebe led them in new directions.

In the second half of the century, a few Mennonite political pacifists have lauded Tolstoy mainly for his positive early influence on Mahatma Gandhi and his influence on Martin Luther King's civil disobedience movement.<sup>44</sup> An approval of Tolstoyan pacifism and civil disobedience can, with the help of

some generational transfer and modification, become both political and effective. The British Raj was, after all, driven from India and the Jim Crow laws were erased from the American South's law books. In other contexts, however, the effectiveness and morality of Tolstoy's anarchistic nonresistance in regards to subsequent Russian history becomes the subject of vigorous debate among pacifists and nonpacifists alike.

The purest and most practical appropriation of Tolstoy's views has come in the late twentieth century by the very sectarian groups Tolstoy most explicitly admired in the nineteenth. For example, one of the most moving readings I have heard of Tolstoy was in the early seventies when my wife and I spent several days at the New Meadow Run Bruderhof in Farmington, Pennsylvania. After an evening dinner, we listened to a reading of Tolstoy's short story "How Much Land Does A Man Need" in all its simplicity, clarity, and beauty and with no added comment. The conservative Amish Mennonite publishers in Minerva, Ohio, have recently published an 88-page booklet entitled *Tolstoy and the Secret of Happiness*.<sup>45</sup>

But Tolstoy's largest ideological legacy remains mainly with two twentieth-century writers, one in history and the other in biblical studies. This survey will conclude with these two writers and thinkers.

## VI

The most influential Tolstoy disciple among twentieth-century Mennonites is historian Robert Friedmann (1891-1970). An important interpreter of Anabaptism from the 1930s onwards, Friedmann became a self-confessed Tolstoyan during his university years when he was studying philosophy and history following World War I. After completing his doctorate in history at the University of Vienna, he served from 1926 to 1932 as chair of the International Tolstoy League and lectured on pacifism and the peace movement. He confessed that Tolstoy was his door of entry into Anabaptism: "The first awakening of my spiritual life I owe to Leo Tolstoy. I began as a Tolstoyan."<sup>46</sup> His book-length study of Tolstoy was published in 1929, copies of which can be found in the Goshen College Mennonite Historical Library, Archives of the Mennonite Church, and the Yale University's Sterling Library.<sup>47</sup>

Friedmann in later years confessed that it was only after coming into contact with Leo Tolstoy that he became interested in Christianity. After studying the Swiss socialist Leonhard Ragaz, he moved on to the Bible and Anabaptism, studies which later provided some of the basic ideas for Harold S. Bender's famous "The Anabaptist Vision," which he presented as a paper in 1943.

Friedmann shared Tolstoy's aversion to doctrine and the New Testament Pauline Epistles. In a seminal article in the 1940 *Church History*, Friedmann suggests that a new starting point for understanding the Anabaptists depends on

the approach one takes toward the Scriptures and specifically to the New Testament. He settles on the Synoptic Gospel interpretation as the original teaching by Christ of the imminent Kingdom of God toward which we must ceaselessly strive in love and suffering and purity. This interpretation he identifies with the old evangelical brotherhoods, the Franciscans, the Waldensians, the Evangelical Anabaptists, the Quakers (partially), and with Tolstoy.<sup>48</sup>

Other Anabaptist scholars have noted the greater reliance of the Anabaptists on the New Testament. None, however, has found a wedge driven between Paul and Christ and between doctrine and ethics to this extent, and the categories of the Kingdom of God on earth come right out of Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*.<sup>49</sup> Friedmann used these same Tolstoyan interpretative categories in his most important book, *Mennonite Piety Through the Centuries*, to show what he considers to be the negative influence of pietism on Anabaptism.<sup>50</sup> *Mennonite Piety Through the Centuries*, although using Tolstoyan categories, does not mention Tolstoy by name. Friedmann's conclusion to an overview of Anabaptism and Pietism attempts to contrast the decline of "sturdy Anabaptism" with "sweet Pietism." He contrasts the doctrine of justification, as it was found in the epistles of the Apostle Paul, against the doctrine of the Kingdom of God in the Gospels. In a similar way, Friedmann's *The Theology of Anabaptism* (1973) can be understood as a Tolstoyan reading of Anabaptist theology.<sup>51</sup> Friedmann's final unpublished book-length manuscript "Design for Living" is a philosophical mix of moral betterment and secular discipleship. According to Friedmann, personal service is taught in "its finest literary expression" in Tolstoy's short story "Master and Man," and he uses Tolstoy's definition of faith as an intuitive process.<sup>52</sup>

Although Friedmann claims that Tolstoy was the door through which he entered Anabaptism, his influence may be even more pervasive than this image might indicate. Friedmann's ultimate concern "was the question of how to attain peace and social justice," and he found in Anabaptist history a "vehicle" or "carrier" for this idea.<sup>53</sup> For Friedmann, the Tolstoyan influence leads to advocating a humanistic and ethical Anabaptism which comes very close to Tolstoy's nontranscendent and noncreedal Christianity.

More recently, Clarence Bauman (1928-1995) was an explicit Tolstoyan Christian. He gave much of his life to the teaching of biblical studies at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana, where he introduced a generation of pastors and students to the Sermon on the Mount. Toward the end of his 440-page study of the Sermon on the Mount, this Mennonite theologian and Christian mystic inserts a disclaimer. "We do not intend to say: All other interpretations are wrong; Tolstoy alone represents light and truth!"<sup>54</sup> But it is a modest disclaimer, for when he compares other interpreters with Tolstoy, and finally says that "the truth of the matter lies in the admission that ethics is of the essence of the religion of Jesus," he comes very close to Tolstoy.<sup>55</sup>

For Bauman, Tolstoy, often mentioned with the Anabaptists, is the measure for the practicability and relevance of the Sermon on the Mount. In acknowledging the Mennonite-Anabaptist *Nachfolge Christi* tradition, Bauman is ashamed

that so much of the theological enterprise has been given to explaining away the Sermon's truth. His compelling and masterful study of the Sermon is imbued from beginning to end with Tolstoy's literal *nova lex Christi*. At the same time, compared to Tolstoy, his spirit is more generous towards other, often esoteric, German points of view which he discusses, and he has a greater sense of an "Almighty God" who transcends human experience. "Despite all ethical rigorism, the sanctification of man intended by the Law as the earthly embodiment of the holy is not, in the last analysis, accomplished by human attempts to keep the commandments but by God himself."<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, Tolstoy's stern visage can be seen peering over almost every page of this book, and Bauman's disarming and gentle spirit almost convinces us that Tolstoy is within the fold of biblical, if not orthodox, Christianity.

When Bauman died in August of 1995, many of his former students paid tribute to him on the electronic bulletin board MENNOLINK. David F. Bishop of New York City said: "His voice was distinctive and his use of silence while making his points was penetrating. I can still hear his reciting of 'The Three Hermits' by Tolstoy; 'Three are ye, three are we, have mercy upon us!'"<sup>57</sup>

Bauman's Tolstoyan biblical studies are more convincing than Friedmann's history for their honesty in acknowledging their rootedness in Tolstoy. Friedmann owes more but acknowledges less.

## VII

A century after the first publication of *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* (1893), Tolstoy still stands as a literary, intellectual and moral giant with whom Mennonites have had some minor interaction. If the nineteenth-century Mennonites had a modest influence on Tolstoy through Daniel Musser's writing and the example of the Russian Mennonite forestry service nonresistants, Tolstoy returned the favor with a greater influence on Mennonites in the twentieth century. Most of the Tolstoyan interaction with the Mennonites happened after his death and outside of the Russian Empire. The exception during his lifetime was the 1903 critical analysis of his social thought by the Goshen College president Noah Byers. Tolstoy's greatest influence, however, was on the German emigre and Anabaptist historian Robert Friedmann. Biblical scholar and Christian mystic Clarence Bauman also used Tolstoy as a benchmark for his thorough studies of the Sermon on the Mount.

Much of the Mennonite interaction with Tolstoy comes in a more selective way, however. Although they find affinity with and inspiration in his rigorous nonresistance to evil, many are uncomfortable with his rejection of orthodox Christianity, his rejection of the church, and his embracing of political anarchy. But even when they have disagreed with aspects of Tolstoy's dogmatic nonresistance, Tolstoy's moral claims and literary achievements have attracted and

challenged some of our finest Mennonite historical, theological and literary minds. Leo Tolstoy is missing as an entry in *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, even though Mahatma Gandhi has over a page in the recently published Volume Five. One need not detract from Gandhi's importance to suggest that there may be an important oversight here.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Al Reimer, *My Harp Is Turned to Mourning*, (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1985), 126.

<sup>2</sup> Johannes Harder, "Lev (Leo) Nikolajewitsch, Count." *Mennonitisches Lexikon* (Karlsruhe: Heinrich Schneider, 1967), 344.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel S. Wenger, "The Mennonitism of Leo Tolstoy and His Reference to Daniel Musser," *Mennonite Research Journal* (April, 1964), 22.

<sup>4</sup> Johannes Harder, "Lev (Leo) Nikolajewitsch, Count," *Mennonitisches Lexikon* (Karlsruhe: Heinrich Schneider, 1967), 343-344. Harder lists as sources: Johannes Harder, "Between Nihilism and Discipleship: An Interpretation of Tolstoy" in *Der Mensch im Russischen Roman* (Wuppertal-Barmen: Jugenddienst, 1961) and Franz Heinrich Philipp, *Tolstoi und der Protestantismus* (Giessen, 1959).

<sup>5</sup> Johannes Harder, *Der Mensch im Russischen Roman*.

<sup>6</sup> Al Reimer, "In Memoriam," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 5 (1987), 171.

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Harry Loewen Mennonite Church.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Dietrich Neufeld to Alexandra Tolstoy, March 30, 1954, Dietrich Neufeld Collection, Box 2, No. 38, Bethel College Mennonite Library and Archives.

<sup>10</sup> Dietrich Neufeld Collection, Box 2, No. 38, Bethel College Mennonite Library and Archives.

<sup>11</sup> Dietrich Neufeld Collection, Box 9, Bethel College Mennonite Library and Archives.

<sup>12</sup> Letter from John Unruh-Friesen, October 18, 1993.

<sup>13</sup> *The Christliche Lehre von der Wehrlosigkeit Briefwechsel zwischen Graf Leo Tolstoi von Russland und Prediger Adin Ballou von Amerika*, The Christian Teaching Regarding Nonresistance in the Letters Between Count Leo Tolstoy of Russia and Preacher Adin Ballou of the United States (Hillsboro: J.G. Ewert, 1899). *Arena* was a social and political reform magazine published in Boston from 1889-1909.

<sup>14</sup> James C. Juhnke, "J.G. Ewert" A Mennonite Socialist," *Mennonite Life* (January, 1968), 13.

<sup>15</sup> Juhnke, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Donald D. Kauffman sermon, 8/16/1980, page 2, Bethel College Mennonite Historical Library and Archives. Hilda Krahn also recalls her late husband referring to this event while lecturing on Russian history among the Mennonite colonists in Paraguay (conversation on May 18, 1996). A perusal of Krahn's early letters and autobiographical writings at Bethel College Mennonite Historical Library and Archives does not show any references to this event or to Tolstoy.

<sup>17</sup> Harvey L. Dyck, "Peter Brock and the History of Pacifism," *Conrad Grebel Review* (Spring, 1989), 155.

<sup>18</sup> Levi Miller, "Daniel Musser and Leo Tolstoy," *Mennonite Historical Bulletin* (April, 1993), 1-7.

<sup>19</sup> The story of this service is told by Lawrence Klippenstein, "Mennonite Pacifism and State

Service in Russia. A Case Study in Church-State Relations 1789-1936" (Unpublished PhD dissertation. University of Minnesota, 1984). *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* (London: Oxford University Press, 1893), 34, 44, 218.

<sup>20</sup> News note appeared in *Herald of Truth* (March 15, 1892), 91. Articles appeared in *Herald of Truth* (May 15, 1896), 145-147, a reprint from *The Voice* (April 16, 1895), a temperance and reform weekly published in New York. "Count Tolstoi on Patriotism," *Herald of Truth* (June 1, 1896), 163-164. In the May issue's introduction of Tolstoy, Funk referred to an earlier article on Adin Ballou's conversation with Tolstoy which appeared two months earlier in *Herald of Truth*, but this reference cannot be located.

<sup>21</sup> C. K. Hostetler, *Goshen College Record* (November, 1903), 243.

<sup>22</sup> Noah E. Byers, "Tolstoy and American Communists," *Goshen College Record* (November, 1903), 237-240; (December, 1903), 244-248. I am indebted to Nathan Yoder for calling this important essay to my attention.

<sup>23</sup> Byers, 248.

<sup>24</sup> Walter Sawatsky, "Pacifist Protestants in Soviet Russia between the Wars," a chapter to be published in Tatiana Pavlova, *The Long Road of Russian Pacifism* (Moscow, 1996).

<sup>25</sup> John Horsch, *The Mennonite Church and Modernism* (Scottsdale: printed at Mennonite Publishing House, 1924), 69.

<sup>26</sup> Guy F. Hershberger, *War, Peace, and Nonresistance* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1944), 218-219.

<sup>27</sup> J. Lawrence Burkholder, *The Problem of Social Responsibility from the Perspective of the Mennonite Church* (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1989, originally a 1958 Princeton doctoral dissertation), 70.

<sup>28</sup> David Janzen, "Christianity and Communism," *The Canadian Mennonite* (February 15 to March 15, 1957).

<sup>29</sup> Janzen (February 22, 1957), 2.

<sup>30</sup> Janzen (March 15, 1957), 2.

<sup>31</sup> Melvin Gingerich, *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 32 (1958), 234-35.

<sup>32</sup> Samuel Wenger, "The Mennonitism of Leo Tolstoy," *Mennonite Research Journal* (April, 1964), 15.

<sup>33</sup> Wenger, 22.

<sup>34</sup> John H. Yoder, *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace and Revolution* (Elkhart: Co-Op Bookstore, 1983), 311.

<sup>35</sup> Yoder, 312, 315.

<sup>36</sup> Yoder, 313.

<sup>37</sup> Willard H. Smith, *The Social and Political Thought of William Jennings Bryan* (Lawrence, Kansas: Coronado Press, 1975). Smith also arranged for Tolstoy's daughter, Alexandra Tolstoy, to speak at a Goshen College Lecture Music Series in 1957.

<sup>38</sup> John H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

<sup>39</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *What Is Art? and Essays on Art* (London: Oxford University Press, 1930).

<sup>40</sup> "For Goodness' Sake," *Books in Canada* (February, 1980), 3.

<sup>41</sup> John Gardiner, *On Moral Fiction* (New York: Basic Books, 1979).

<sup>42</sup> Al Reimer, *My Harp Is Turned to Mourning* (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1985).

<sup>43</sup> W. J. Keith, ed., *A Voice in the Land. Essays by and about Rudy Wiebe* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1981).

<sup>44</sup> Duane K. Friesen, *Christian Peacemaking and International Conflict* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1986), 227; John Richard Burkholder, "Witness to the State: A Mennonite Perspective," *Issues to Discuss* (Scottsdale: Mennonite Publishing House, 1979), 186-87), originally in *Gospel Herald* (August 17, 1976).

<sup>45</sup> Jerald Hiebert, *Tolstoy and the Secret of Happiness* (Minerva: Christian Printing Mission, 1992).

<sup>46</sup> Leonard Gross, "Conversations with Robert Friedmann," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 48 (1974), 146.

<sup>47</sup> Robert Friedmann, *Leo Tolstoy* (Munich: Religio, 1929).

<sup>48</sup> Robert Friedmann, "Conception of the Anabaptists," *Church History* 9 (1940), 360-61.

<sup>49</sup> Leo Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984, reprinted in 1994).

<sup>50</sup> Robert Friedmann, *Mennonite Piety Through the Centuries* (Goshen: Mennonite Historical Society, 1949); a reprint from essays which appeared in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* in 1940. For another reading of Pietism and Anabaptism, see John D. Roth, "Pietism and the Anabaptist Soul," *The Dilemma of Anabaptist Piety* (Bridgewater, Va.: Bridgewater College Forum for Religious Studies, 1997) 17-33.

<sup>51</sup> Levi Miller, "A Reconstruction of Evangelical Anabaptism," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 69 (1995), 300-301.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Friedmann, "Design for Living," Archives of the Mennonite Church, 217-219, 245.

<sup>53</sup> Leonard Gross, "Conversations with Robert Friedmann," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 48 (1974), 141.

<sup>54</sup> Clarence Bauman, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Modern Quest for its Meaning* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1985) 406.

<sup>55</sup> Bauman, 420.

<sup>56</sup> Bauman, 408.

<sup>57</sup> David F. Bishop, August 22, 1995, posting on MENNOLINK.